

antecedent

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by [thanotaphobia \(blue000jay\)](#)

Summary

Chimneys pouring smoke, a cart propped up against a woodshed. Horses and barns and cows, a road solidifying into an icy mass of dirt and snow. Phil tips his head back and observes the clocktower, and beyond that, the shiny spires of the palace.

His home. After a year and a half.

It's bittersweet. He's arriving home for a funeral, after all, and after the funeral he'll be crowned emperor himself. He doesn't feel ready.

(or, the reapertrio-centric prequel to [Cataclysm](#), the 30 years of the Continent before we knew it.)

Notes

HERE WE GO!!!!!! im so excited to get this one started<3 i hope you guys give it the same love you gave cata :))

coronation

Chapter Notes

thank you antimony_medusa for looking this chapter over!

30 YEARS, 23 DAYS, 4 HOURS BEFORE EMPEROR PHILZA DECLARES WAR ON THE OPUS ISLES.

North of the Kirnach, there's a small village.

Phil likes this village. He's passed through it once or twice on his way south, and then back up towards Eider. Only with diplomatic convoys— this time, it's a little different. Military men surround him now, soldiers and captains and lieutenants. Phil likes soldiers and their camps, they way they buzz around like worker bees. It's comforting, and more importantly, easy to blend in. He can don a normal face and pretend as though his world isn't crumbling around him.

His father is dead. Phil sits around a campfire and accepts a drink from a man in Empire-blue fatigues.

"Can't believe it," someone is saying just beyond his line of sight. A mug clinks against his own, and Phil laughs, the sound bubbling up from his chest.

"I can," he says, and a hand slaps against his shoulder. More laughter, some of it disbelieving. "What? Long live the king."

"Don't sully his Majesty's good name," one of the soldiers says with a cheeky grin, face red and flushed. "You might get your head cut off for it."

"I wouldn't," Phil says easily, leaning back. Liquid sloshes over his fingers as he does, slightly off-balance. It is not his first drink of the night.

"Oh, we know, golden boy," one of the older captains says. Phil knows him well. He'd trained under him for many years, watched and studied and been apprenticed, at one point. It was nice. The man had always been good to him. He raises his brow at Phil: he is the only man in the camp who knows who he really is. "But things said in a stupor like ours are not easily forgiven in the morning."

"I forgive you all," Phil says preemptively, raising his glass. "Nothing tonight will be remembered."

"If you keep drinking like that, I wouldn't be surprised," one of the soldiers beside him says, and Phil bursts out with a laugh, leaning forward and dipping his head down, grinning wildly

below his bangs. The fact before had been a lie; the older captain is the only one who is supposed to know who he is. Of course they all know, but it's easy to pretend they don't.

"That's the plan," Phil says loudly, lifting his drink high into the air and crowing, "Long live the king!"

"Long live the king," the older captain echoes, and a chorus of voices join him.

His father is dead, and so he travels north.

They ride horses up the river, away from the ocean and towards the highlands and after that, mountains. Osprey is their pretty capital, a mountainside town with the river leading into the lake in the center, perfect for trade. It's Phil's hometown— he was born there, his mother and father died there, and he will be crowned king there. He will be buried beneath the mountains just like all his forefathers one day, he's sure of it. Osprey is north, along the river, and so they travel that way. Boats can be seen over the sparse treeline on the river's edge, sailors heading up or down, depending on the day. Phil likes to watch for sails as they ride, the captain ahead of him and men behind. Despite their quick pace, it will take a few days for Phil to get home. By then, his father will have been dead for almost a week. Phil knows he will immediately be crowned, and then the real work will begin.

The sickness had been sudden, the letter had said. A seizing of his heart and he was gone.

Phil isn't supposed to be king yet. He's not ready.

And yet he is. The men call him Majesty, even when he flips them off. These soldiers are his friends, his colleagues, and despite him trying to insist that nothing has changed, it has. There is status between them, shielding him from their friendship. They get distant. Phil is utterly alone for the first time in his life, and it's painful.

They stop on the outskirts of a small village along the Kirnach. They call the town Tempest—it's tiny, just a small dock and a few spattering of houses. There's a tavern.

Phil finds his way there that night, sneaking out from under the canvas tents they'd propped up. The air is chilly and nips his nose— winter is coming, the true winter, and he bundles himself up in furs to fight it off. Dark furs, ones that help him blend into the trees and sneak away from their encampment and into the town. The tavern is lit up in bright light, the inn next door packed with horses. This town is small, but it's an important part of the Empire's ecosystem. Slipping his crow-laden insignia off his chest, Phil pats his bag full of gold and eyes the bar, ready to make his small mark in the upkeep of an economy.

It's a quaint little place, packed to the brim with locals who side-eye him when he enters, pulling the door shut to the blustering wind behind him. None of them seem suspicious though, just curious, and his fatigues sort out that curiosity soon enough. He's just a soldier here to drink, and drink he does. They have this fabulous honey mead, he finds, happily paying for the largest sized stein they have and chatting cheerfully with the bartender. Here, he's not His Eminence the Emperor— he's just Phil, some guy. He likes that.

He's at the bar when someone sits next to him. It's crowded, a little bumpy, and Phil is jovial on sweet honey-mead when he turns and crows at the person who was jostled against his side.

"Mate!" he says. The guy— it's someone taller than him, only by an inch or so. They're in mostly brown warm wool, a cloak over their shoulders but pushed back in the warmth of the inn. The most striking thing is the shoulder-length pink hair pulled back slick against their skull into a tight braid, and the bright red eyes that stare at Phil as he grins. "Watch yourself, yeah?"

"In here?" the kid— he must be around Phil's age, maybe? His voice is deep, dry. He scoffs. "Right."

"Bit crowded," Phil admits, and shifts to the side. "Want a pint?"

"No, I came to the bar to just sit, actually," the guy says and Phil laughs, bright. It's not that funny, but he's in a good mood from the alcohol as he gestures over to the bartender and orders them both another drink with a vague hand wave. "Woah, hey now—"

"On me," Phil tells him, shifting over so the guy has room against the bar. "Seriously, don't argue. I don't mind."

"What's that they say about people that live up here?" the guy asks dryly. "Something about iced over hearts?"

"Just 'cause we're mean doesn't mean we're not kind," Phil corrects. "You from the south?"

"Somewhere near the border."

"A citizen?"

"Are you a cop? Your face looks kind of familiar, honestly," the guy says, and Phil laughs again, nodding as he shuffles just enough so he can show off his army pin. "Oh. Oops."

"I'm Phil," he says, sticking out his hand to the guy. "Infantry."

"Technoblade," the guy says, shaking hesitantly. "Sorry for that."

"Please, it's fine. I get it all the time." As he says it, the bartender brings over their drinks, and Phil takes his own and slides Technoblade's over to him. The guy— no, kid, his face is a little too young for him to be over the age of twenty— watches him suspiciously, eyes slightly narrowed over the rim of his mug as he takes a sip. "It's mandatory here, not like it's uncommon. Half the men in here were like me, once." Kind of. Not all of them were crown princes, of course.

"Mandatory?" Technoblade asks.

"Every man owes three years of military service," Phil says, cupping his drink in hand. Technoblade's face drops into a scowl. "Oh, come on, it's not that terrible."

“Yeah but they don’t have a choice,” Technoblade argues back. “What if he doesn’t want to? What if his family needs him?”

“Well,” Phil says, pausing, “that’s why they get to pick when. It doesn’t have to be all at once, either. Technically a man could serve all three years using one-week time slots over the course of his life. Military service doesn’t just mean fighting, either. A lot of the troops during peacetime end up working on infrastructure, keeping the roads maintained or doing other construction projects. I know a few kids who joined the moment they turned sixteen and spent the three years in the officer’s school, using that to finish up their education. It’s not all bad.”

Techno’s face is scrunched up. Phil looks at him, then snickers.

“Did you not know that?” he asks, and Techno slowly shakes his head. Phil laughs, raising his drink to his lips and taking a sip. “Nice one, mate.”

“No one ever *told* me,” Technoblade says, and Phil snickers again. “How do you know all that?”

“Uh.” Phil shrugs. “Family’s big on it.”

“Military history?”

“Why do you think I’m here?”

“Fair point.” Techno glances to the side. “Would I have to enlist?”

“Were you born here?” Phil asks. Techno blinks at him, wide eyes, and purses his lips.

“I... don’t know,” he says. “Like I said. Somewhere down by the border. Could be either side.”

“You don’t have any papers?” Phil asks, and Techno looks away again, eyes roaming the room full of people.

“No,” he admits. “Not really.”

“Then I suppose you’re exempt,” Phil says, considering the problem and itching a spot on his chin. “If you’re not in one place long enough for someone to notice you, and don’t have papers, then you’re probably off the hook. We have enough recruits anyways, honestly. It’s alright that some people slip through the cracks.”

“You talk like a general,” Technoblade informs him, and that makes Phil laugh again. “What?”

“You’re not entirely inaccurate,” Phil admits, staring down at the golden mead in his stein. The whole world feels strange, bubbly and unfocused, and he realizes he’s just about finished his third drink. Ah. That explains why. Techno is still looking at him strangely, and Phil just pushes his mug forward, arms stretching out over the counter. He blinks. “I lied to you,” he says. It slips from his lips before he can stop it— apparently when he’s tipsy, he becomes

anything *but* a liar. Technoblade turns, staring at him with a surprised look and a drink halfway raised to his lips. He pauses, and then sets it down.

“What?” Technoblade asks. Phil grimaces. There’s another thing he’s now learned about Techno in the spawn of just a few minutes; he doesn’t seem fond of liars.

“I lied to you,” he repeats, and then the whole story is spilling out of him and onto the table, sticky as beer. “Earlier. When you said my face was familiar and I said it’s just a thing I get a lot. I lied. Well, not about the— the— the getting it a lot, thing. I do. I get it a lot.”

“Phil.” Technoblade looks hesitant and confused, but at least not on the edge of anger. That’s good. “Slow down. What?”

“I lied,” Phil insists, and then, ‘cause it’s easier. “My full name’s Philza. I’m gettin’— coordi— cono— oh, fuck me, I’m king next week. When I get home.”

Techno blinks. He lifts his drink back up, and takes a long, slow sip. When it comes down, he’s got a bit of foam on his upper lip. “Crowned,” he says, licking the foam off with a pause. “Your coronation’s next week. Of *course* it is. You’re not a *general*. Oh, for Channel’s sake—”

“You follow the Channel?” Phil asks, because it hasn’t come up in conversation yet and he’s drunk and just revealed a very scary, very big secret to his new best friend (who doesn’t know they’re best friends yet, he thinks). “Prime for me. Whole royal lineage, too.”

“Royal,” Techno says, tasting the words like whisky on his tongue, and yep, he’s still absorbing. Phil slams back the rest of his drink, wiping the excess foam away from his upper lip. Techno is staring at him with wide, curious eyes.

“Yup,” Phil says, just to break the silence.

“And yet you’re getting drunk in the middle of nowhere,” Techno says, and Phil giggles.

“Yup,” he says again. “Captain wanted us to be *discreet*.”

“Oh, boy,” Techno says, heaving a sigh that makes Phil giggle again. “Where— where are you camped? In the inn?”

“Nope,” Phil tells him, deciding his head is too heavy to hold up anymore and lies it down on his elbow, propping himself on the table and shutting his eyes. He’s tired. He might’ve said that out loud, based on the way Technoblade sighs again. Phil cracks open his eyes, watching as Techno puts down his drink and gives one little determined nod.

“Okay,” he says. “You gotta tell me where you’re camped, and I’ll get you back there, okay?”

“Mhm.” Phil is too tired for words. Techno blinks, then looks a little concerned.

“Uh— P— your Majesty? Is that—”

“Don’t,” Phil snaps, the irritation and misplaced anger rising and bursting before he can stop it. “Don’t call me that. Please.” Anger turns to desperation. “Not yet. I’m not— not ready.”

Please.”

“...oh-kay,” Techno says quietly, and he mutters something low and under his breath that Phil can’t hear. He’s too caught up in his own head to care, anyways; the terror of his coronation, looming over his head like a dangling sword. Or an executioner’s ax. He’s not ready. He’s not *ready*. It hits him like a wagon, and before he can stop them tears well up in his eyes. Technoblade looks baffled as Phil sits up and then wipes his face, pretending like the tears aren’t there. “Why don’t we go outside?” Techno suggests. “It’s warm in here.”

“Yeah,” Phil says, sniffing again. He is warm. Techno is so smart. He tells him as much, watching the other teenager’s cheeks go pink in the golden light of the lanterns. He fumbles with his bag, pulling out an assorted handful of coins that he leaves scattered on the table and has Techno whistling under his breath again.

“That is– way too much, but– you know what, okay,” he says, helping Phil tie up his coin purse again and reattach it to his belt. “Let’s just go.”

“Yes please,” Phil says miserably. He’s hot and flushed, cheeks burning, hands tucked up inside his furs to keep them away from any more alcohol. His face is still damp, and as he tries to get up he stumbles as the world shifts. It must purposefully be doing that, and he scowls at the wooden floor as Techno blinks at him from across the table. “I hate floors,” Phil says to him, trying to explain. “This one keeps– it moves. It hates me.”

“I don’t think the floor hates you,” Techno says warily.

“It does,” Phil says, and he’s proven right once again as he takes another step and the floorboards move out from under him, making him pitch to the side. Before he can fall though (and he’s braced to) there’s a warm arm under his own, a hand grasping his shoulder, and the heat of a body next to him. Phil blinks and turns his head, finding Techno next to him with a furrowed look on his face as he steadies Phil.

“Thanks,” Phil slurs. Techno says nothing, just helps him get upright and staggers them both towards the door. Phil giggles as they go, because it’s funny. He’s the king of the Empire and it’s funny that he’s relying on this– this kid– “How old are you?” he asks, because he just realized he never did.

Techno grunts, kicking open the door with one foot. “Eighteen,” he says. His lips twitch.

“Liar,” Phil sings, and they stumble out into the cold night air. It lifts his spirits some– he’s not hot anymore, and the chill soothes his burning face. “I’m nineteen.”

“I know, Phil.”

“How *old* are you?” Phil asks again, twisting in Techno’s grip and making them both pitch to the side. “Age of majority in the Empire is–” He hiccups. “Sixteen.”

“If I was breakin’ the law, would it matter?” Techno asks dryly.

“No,” Phil says. “I wouldn’t snitch.”

“Thanks,” Techno drawls. Phil giggles wildly. They stagger down the road and Phil points them in the direction of their encampment, giggling sporadically the whole time. It’s funny. It’s so stupidly ridiculous, clinging to this teenager as they head away from the town proper and into the countryside. He’s an Emperor, and he’s drunk off his ass, and he’s going to have to pay Techno *so* much hush money to not tell anyone about this, ever.

They’re halfway there when Techno stops, freezing up in the middle of the small trail they’re taking to get to the camp. Phil stumbles a bit, and Techno hauls him back up. His face is shadowed, but Phil can tell he’s listening for something.

“What is it?” he asks, glancing around. The dark woods reveal to him nothing— not like he could do anything, anyways.

“I’m not sure,” Techno says slowly. “Your Majesty, just—”

Before he can finish, there’s the sound of an arrow being fired. Phil yelps, ducking as his instincts take over, and there’s a thud as the projectile imbeds itself into a tree trunk. Both Techno and Phil stare at it with wide eyes, and then Techno is throwing Phil to the ground (he lands with an oof) and storming in the direction he came from. The sword that had been previously swinging harmlessly on his hip in its sheath is now out, moonlight glinting along its blade. There’s the sound of pattering footsteps, and then in a rushing shout, metal-on-metal.

Phil watches from his place on the ground, mind swirling as he shoves himself up and unsheathes the knife on his belt. It’s small, but it’ll have to do. Nothing like violence to sober up— he scrambles to his feet as Technoblade and the unknown man fight, hard and quick. It’s like nothing he’s ever seen— Techno is fast and light on his feet, ducking and weaving and slamming his blade into the attacker’s. Phil stares, watching as he feints to the left and then digs his feet in. He sees it before the attacker does; the feint turns into a swooping left slash, and the man stumbles backwards, screaming in pain as three of his fingers fall to the ground with a thump, followed by his sword. Then, with another slash, his screaming turns to gurgling as Techno cuts his throat. The movement is practiced— clean. His chest rises and falls intensely as he stands there, watching the man fall to his knees and then face down into the snow, twitching. Phil’s shoulders relax some, adrenaline pumping through his veins.

Techno turns to him, mouth half-open to say something. Phil catches his gaze, then notices it flick to the left, just over his shoulder. Panic fills his vision, and Phil reacts on instinct. He ducks, narrowly avoiding a wide slash from a small knife that would’ve cut his throat. Stumbling to the side, he nearly trips and falls, but manages to get a grip on the silent ambusher’s sleeve and pulls him down with him. Phil flips himself over, and raises his own knife into the air before plunging it down into their eye.

Silence rings, faint gurgling from below him as red stains his fingers and creeps into the soil below.

“ *Phil* ,” Techno says, and then there are hands on his shoulders pulling him up and away from the body. He glances up— Techno is there, face pale and bloodless in the light of the moon. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he reassures, glancing down at the body again. It’s too dark to say what they’re wearing. “I’m fine.”

“We have to— we have to get you back,” Techno says, glancing either way into the woods around them. Phil watches him, squinting. When Techno looks his way again, babbling some shit about *hiding* and *telling your captain*, the words die in his mouth. “What?” he asks. “Why’re you lookin’ at me like that?”

“You fought,” Phil says quietly. Adrenaline aside, he’s still drunk. The world spins on its axis. “For me.”

“I’m not about to let a king die,” Techno says with a nervous laugh, running one hand through his hair. It’s fallen loose, strands dangling in his face. “Much less a drunk one.”

“I’m going to make you a knight,” Phil declares. Techno grimaces.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” he says gently, but Phil is having fucking none of it. Technoblade is going to be one of his knights— a friend, a protector, someone who is good and right and special. He is declaring it now, declaring it to the moon and stars and the whole entire world. He declares it to the dead man at his feet, spitting down at him as he does. Techno watches, a hesitant look on his face as Phil grins.

“You’ll be a knight,” he says. Then: “Thank you.”

That, at least, is genuine. Those are words he wouldn’t take back when sober. Techno seems to know this, because his face softens, and for the first time Phil can see his age. He’s still young— baby fat clinging to cheeks, a roundness to his eyes and a smoothness to his skin that betrays youth. Phil smiles at him, and hesitantly, Techno smiles back.

“No problem,” he says. Techno is young and he knows how to fight well, and Phil wonders where it came from. He wonders what his story is.

He’s determined to find out.

“C’mon, Phil,” Techno says softly, dragging him out from the depths of his mind and back into the real world. “Let’s get you back.”

“Okay,” Phil says, sniffing a little bit and letting Techno sling an arm around his shoulders, drag him fully upright and start shuffling down the path towards the encampment.

“Okay,” Techno echoes.

“Your Highness, with all due respect, I think it’s wise that you stop drinking.”

“Agreed,” Phil says, hand pressed to his forehead as he holds back a mighty hangover. “I very much agree.”

The captain glares at him from across the tent, seemingly unconvinced. Phil's not sure why—he's fucking miserable, thank you very much. His head is pounding, and he's not keen on this happening again. "I'm serious," the older man snaps. "If you had been alone— if this young man hadn't been with you, you would have died."

"I'm aware," Phil says, glancing over to Technoblade.

They'd arrived in the camp last night to a mild frenzy. Apparently, Phil's tent had been broken into by the same people who'd attacked them in the woods, and there had been a mad rush to find him when they'd staggered into the middle of it all. It had taken a lot of explaining, but finally Phil had been able to sleep off the rest of his night and woken early that morning to get scolded. Techno had still been there when he'd woken up, and he was mildly grateful for that. Techno is currently not looking at him— head down, eyes on the floor.

He hates it. He misses the tavern, the easy camaraderie.

Before the captain can speak up again, Phil does. "Thank you," he says. He knows he's already thanked Techno, but he's going to again, when the words mean more. "For helping me last night."

"It was no problem," Techno says, sounding horribly awkward and unsure of himself. Phil frowns lightly. "Just doin' what anyone would do, your Highness."

There it is again. The title. Phil is surprised by how much he hates it.

"Just Phil is fine," he says. Techno glances up— he meets Phil's gaze in surprise, head jerking slightly as he does. "It's the least I can say after... all that." Techno looks at him, eyebrows furrowing in that same look Phil remembers from last night, confused and slightly concerned. Before Phil can say anything else, the captain is speaking up once more.

"You will be rewarded greatly for your bravery," he tells Techno. "Do you live here? Is your family here? We shall grant you anything they need for helping His Majesty."

"I— no," Techno says, voice small. "No, I don't live here."

"And your family?"

Techno's face twists, and he just shakes his head. The captain sighs, and then pulls out a coin purse, one Phil recognizes as his own— wait, hold on. He says nothing though as the man counts out a significant amount of coins into his palm, however.

"For you," he says, holding it out. Techno blinks, and then reaches out to take it. It's like he's moving on autopilot, occasionally glancing Phil's way like he's expecting a sword to come down on his head any second now. He barely even counts the money.

"You have no family?" Phil asks, after a second.

"No," Techno says. It's simple, plain, factual. Disinterested.

“Stay with me,” Phil proposes. Both the captain and Techno blink, and it’s as if some life comes back to Technoblade, bafflement slamming across his face. “As an escort. You proved yourself last night, and I’d be more than honored to give you a rank in the palace back home. A job. The Empire’s army would welcome you.”

“I—” Techno’s face twists again. “Your Highness—”

“Phil.”

“Phil, I’m not sure I want to—”

“Please,” Phil says. “I insist.”

“Is this some kinda punishment?” Techno finally asks, glancing between the captain and Phil. “I mean— I don’t— you don’t have to take pity on me, I’m doin’ fine on my own, the gold is enough, believe me it is—” he huffs a laugh, “enough. I won’t tell anyone about this.”

“This isn’t a bribe,” Phil says, a little confused, but spirited. “I enjoyed your company last night, before the— before the ambush.” He’s being honest, but he can tell Techno is still unsure based on the expression on his face. He quickly follows up with: “But, if you don’t wish to come with us, that’s fine. I will not force any man to do what he doesn’t want to. I just wanted to extend my appreciation, and perhaps get to know you better. You would not be a servant. More of a companion.” *Please stay, please be my friend.*

Techno looks down. He studies the gold in his hand, then looks between Phil and the captain. He looks down again, and Phil notes quietly the shoddy patchwork done on his clothing, the way his hair is still messy from the fight last night, how there is dried blood on his fingers. He remembers Techno fighting like it was as easy as breathing, strangely graceful.

“Okay,” he says. “Sure. Put me to, uh— put me to work, I guess.”

Phil has to refrain from cheering and clapping, if only because he’d make his hangover worse and puking does not sound fun right now. But he does smile, grinning widely at the other boy as he sits in the tent and then shuffles to put the money in his bag.

“Wonderful,” Phil says. “Did you— do you want to clean yourself up?”

“Your Highness,” the captain interrupts. “No time for baths— we have to *go* . And we need to be careful. Assassination attempts should not be looked upon lightly—”

“Technoblade will stay with me, then,” Phil says, and yes maybe he’s being a little vindictive and selfish here, but Techno’s head snaps up and his eyes are unreadable, but not overtly upset. “He protected me once. He could do it again. I won’t leave the camps until we return. Is that fair?”

The captain sighs.

“Fair enough,” he says. He seems to understand this isn’t a fight he’ll win. “We leave at noon today.”

“Awesome,” Phil says again, moving to stand up and then sitting right back down when his stomach decides now is the time to revolt. Yes. Sitting down is good. “Great. Technoblade, would you mind passing me that bucket?”

With a mildly confused look on his face, Techno does. “I thought I wasn’t a servant,” he comments dryly, clearly testing the waters, and Phil snickers as he takes the cool metal into his hands.

“You aren’t,” he says with a lopsided smile. His stomach flips. “Think of this as a favor to a friend.”

Then he turns and promptly vomits his breakfast into the bin.

They ride north. Techno had been going south, he tells Phil, riding side-by-side on two steeds as the rest of the men fall in line behind them. Not for any particular reason, he tells Phil. Just south.

The days are chillier and chillier, and Phil donates a cloak of fur to Techno when he sees the other teenager shivering at one point. The further north they go, the colder it gets, and the more snow accumulates on the ground. They don’t need to worry about crossing the river, but Phil assumes they’ll have to take the long way around the lake when they get to Osprey.

As they ride, they talk. Phil is pretty much the sole participant of the conversation between him and Techno for the first two days, but after that the other starts to loosen up. He confides to Phil that he’s not eighteen, like he’d said prior, but only sixteen.

Sixteen . Phil thinks of the way he’d fought, notes with quiet observance the scars that litter his forearms when they bathe in a stream, and decides that whatever happened to Techno before will never happen again.

The best parts of their trip are the parts where Phil makes Techno laugh. At first it’s just quiet snickers, but then it’s snorts, and finally, full belly laughter that rings out over the tundraland. Techno is funny in turn— he makes witty quips and smart little jokes that have Phil cackling so hard he nearly falls out of his saddle. Whatever hesitance Techno had felt around Phil is loosened in only a few days, the bridle of fear gone as Phil allows Techno to know him, to be free to say what he wants. The other teen is a soldier through and through— he’s not properly trained, but Phil notes with some satisfaction while leaving his tent that Techno is sparring with the other soldiers (and deftly beating most of them) as they travel. He learns parade rest, falling into the hierarchy on his own sort of level. He’s not a soldier, not a captain, but not a servant. He’s Phil’s friend.

He’s also a protector, because even though they’d quelled the assassination attempt, there is an aura of wariness around them at all times. Constantly watching and waiting.

Phil's never had an attempt on his life before this. He wonders how often it will happen— and if any will succeed.

But as they draw closer and closer to Osprey, he puts the macabre thoughts out of his mind. The people recognize him now, this close to the capital where the villages grow into towns, with proper populations and inns that they stay at instead of camping out. He rides through streets and smiles at his people as they wave.

“Is it always like this?” Technoblade asks at one point, hesitantly waving to a woman on the street and watching her happily curtsy in return. Phil just smiles at him and urges his horse onwards. Behind him, Techno looks a little concerned, urging his own steed to follow. “Phil? Phil!”

Phil just laughs.

It is always like that. People's heads turn their way, and Phil makes a quiet conclusion that Technoblade is unused to, and more so *uncomfortable* with it. Phil isn't— it's been that way his whole life, and he knows how to put on a fake smile and bear it easily. Techno is awkward, and so Phil leads the way. It's easy to be unseen when you're standing next to an emperor, after all.

People still notice. Whispers start to fly around detailing the young man the soon to be Emperor Philza is traveling with, scarred hands grasping his horses' reins and mid length pink hair that is braided up to his scalp. Rumors spread about his origin, all sorts of wild stories. Phil learns about them through whispers his men bring to him, and Techno in turn hears them too.

“I'm not— no,” Techno says one night, on the banks of Osprey's lake. “I'm not a mercenary.”

“You could be,” Phil offers. Techno's nose scrunches up.

“No thanks,” he says. “I'm not super interested in killing people again.” Then, as the words sink in, he snaps his mouth shut. Phil blinks. Their dinner steams between them, stew in warm wooden bowls that sends clouds of heat up into the cold air. Outside, there is silence. It's too cold this time of year for crickets, but Phil thinks they'd be appropriate.

“Again?” he asks. Techno's lips twist and he gnaws on his bottom lip, and then shoves a spoonful of food into his mouth.

“Not a big deal,” he says through the beef and carrots. Phil stares at him.

“Not a big deal?” he asks. “You're— sixteen, Techno.”

“And?” Techno takes another bite of stew. “There's worse stuff out there.”

“Who did you kill?” Phil asks, unable to help himself. Techno freezes again, and then sighs, setting down his spoon.

“It's not important,” he says. Phil watches him, notes the distant look in his eyes, and decides tonight's not the night to press the matter. He opens his mouth and then closes it, then opens it

again.

“We’ll be in Osprey tomorrow,” he says, trying to think of a way to change the subject without it being awkward. He clearly fails, based on the way the corner of Techno’s mouth quirks up. “You’ll have to be ready for a few crowds. More than a few, actually. I’ll do my best to keep everyone off your back, but I haven’t been home in— a while.”

Home. Phil’s suddenly sobered by the thought of it, and he’s reminded abruptly of the fact that he’s coming home to be Emperor. He’s coming home to bury his father.

Gently, he sets down his food.

Techno had distracted him for a few days, making it so he all but forgot. He’s not just a nobody soldier anymore, hidden in the ranks and learning about his people. He’s crown prince and soon-to-be ruler of the entire Empire. Phil inhales, focusing on the way it fills his chest and grounds him. When he looks back up, Techno is staring at him, eyes wide.

“There will be ceremonies,” Phil continues, ignoring the look. “Uh— manners. Dress. You’ll have to be— tailored.”

“Phil,” Techno says, and he pushes his own bowl away. “Hey.”

“I assume you’ll be given a room and the like, there will be people to help while I’m busy—”

“I am not leaving your side.” The conviction in his voice is like stone at the bottom of a mountain, compressed and strong and unwavering. It grips Phil’s heart and keeps him on earth, a thin line stretching between him and Techno and tethering them together. He looks up and stares, meeting Techno’s eyes. They don’t look like the eyes of a sixteen-year-old, not really. But despite that, Phil can see the fear from his own eyes echoed in Techno’s. A childish fear of growing up; something neither of them are ready for, and yet.

“Maybe that’s fair,” Phil says, his mouth dry as a bone. Techno smiles, crooked and toothy.

“Alright,” he says. “Sounds like a plan. I stick by you.”

“You stick by me,” Phil echoes. “You... *want* to stick by me?”

“Where else would I go?” Techno asks. Neither of them say anything for another second, and then a laugh bubbles up out of Phil’s throat without him realizing. He barks it out, breathy and unsure, then looks down at the muddy floor of their tent. He’s not sure when the bond between them had solidified into something this strong, but fuck, he’s not complaining.

It’s been a while since he’s had a friend.

“With me is just fine,” Phil admits, tipping his head.

“Cool,” Techno breathes. Phil nods, once.

They eat the rest of their dinner in silence.

They arrive at Osprey after skirting the lake.

The clocktower is visible from afar, and only grows closer. Sails can be seen, masts of ships docked and frozen into place for the winter. It's getting colder and colder, and Phil layers both him and Techno with more and more furs as they approach the capital. They get new horses a few hours before they arrive, tacked out in royal decoration, and Techno runs his hands over the bridle and reins like he's never touched anything so expensive. He probably hasn't— Phil makes sure to drape another fur over his neck when he thinks he's not paying attention. A good one, too. Wolverine from the north, brilliantly white. The color makes Techno's pink hair stand out even more against the blues and grays and light colors, a splash of spring amongst the snow.

The city doesn't have an official boundary. No wall to keep the people in, or the bad things out. It starts slowly— a shack here, a house there. Chimneys pouring smoke, a cart propped up against a woodshed. Horses and barns and cows, a road solidifying into an icy mass of dirt and snow. Phil tips his head back and observes the clocktower, and beyond that, the shiny spires of the palace.

His home. After a year and a half.

It's bittersweet. He's arriving home for a funeral, after all, and after the funeral he'll be crowned emperor himself. A job he's not nearly prepared enough for— it feels like he's jumping off a cliff, blindfolded, with his hands tied behind his back. He has no idea if underneath him will be water or sharp stones.

"I've never been here," Techno says off-handedly.

"Really?" Phil asks, turning to look at him. "Not once?"

"Nope," Techno says, popping the p. His eyes are head of them both, scanning the distance.

"It's a good city," Phil says, quick to reassure. "And the people are warm and welcoming. A little weird, 'cause it's always cold here, but I promise everyone will be kind. And if they're not, I'll have them thrown in jail or something."

"Or somethin'," Techno drawls, glancing over at him with a half-grin. "Are you gonna be the type of ruler that beheads people at his whim?"

Phil gasps. "No! Well. No, I'm not."

"I dunno..." Techno shrugs. "You kinda seem the type."

"You barely know me," Phil points out, thrusting a pointer at him and shaking it. "Don't go assuming things."

“You’ve been insistent on changin’ that fact, so,” Techno says, and Phil can’t stop the grin that spreads over his face. A crack in the ice, so to speak. “I mean, staying with you—”

“No take backsies,” Phil is quick to say, and Techno snorts. “What! I’m just doubling down. You can’t take it back. You’re staying with me.” And unsaid, he knows Techno knows what he means: *I need you. I need your support.*

The closer they get to Osprey’s side gate, the more Phil’s hands shake. He knows Techno sees it. He tries to hide it by gripping the reins, but he can’t fully get rid of the tremors that shake him to his very core.

Eventually, they make it. The air around them is both mournful and celebratory— people throw carnations at their feet and burgundy tapestries line shops and market stalls, people dressed in red, the color of mourning. Phil knows the palace will be bathed in the color for months to come, and he himself bears a bright maroon sash. He is grieving; the whole empire is.

They march through the streets of Osprey, cobbles under their feet and people bowing in the streets. Children follow their company in a crowd, and somehow a steaming pork bun makes it into Phil’s hand. He passes it off to Techno to eat, his own stomach lurching at the thought the closer and closer they get to the palace. They pass the fort and the docks, snow piled on steep rooftops, and then they pass the embassy. And just beyond that— the palace.

It’s a grand structure. A wide, open front with dozens of windows, a flat roof and opulent carvings decorating the outside. The facade is a pale blue color, and each part of it Phil knows was personally designed by his great-great-great grandfather, and finished being built just after he died. The outside of it is carved with dozens of stone crows, some in flight, others posed on tree branches; a hallmark sigil of their family and by association, the Empire. He knows pretty much every inch of the grounds, and there is some comfort in coming home. They pass through the gates and Techno is openly gaping, mouth hanging open as he stares at the building, a half-eaten pork bun in his hand. Behind them, the clock tower chimes as it strikes the hour, and they approach the main square and slow down. Phil can see a group of people waiting for them, and as they approach one of the people breaks from the crowd and darts forward. Phil grins— while nervous, he can’t help but be excited either.

He ignores Techno’s confused noise when he dismounts his horse before it completely stops, feet hitting the ground and making his ass ache from all the riding they’ve been doing. He doesn’t let it stop him, instead darting forward to meet the person halfway across the plaza. They crash into each other, arms wide, and Phil laughs brightly.

“Phil!” the man says, all windswept brown hair and bright eyes, a red sash similar to Phil’s slung across his uniform. Phil takes a moment to look at him when they pull back from the hug, grinning widely as he does.

“Ian,” he says, relief flooding through every bone in his body. “It’s good to see you.”

“And you,” Ian says cheerfully. “The palace has been so *boring* without anyone to terrorize.”

“Mate, you don’t need me in order to do that,” Phil says, and both of them laugh, Phil slapping him hard on the shoulder and receiving one in return before they break apart fully. Around them, the plaza has become a hive of activity as various servants pour out from the palace and start helping their company dismount and unpack— in the middle of it all, Phil spots a confused and overwhelmed looking Techno. He gestures for him to come over, and Ian raises a brow, giving Phil a clear *who is he?* look.

“Ian,” Phil says, once Techno is close enough for Phil to put a hand on his shoulder and guide him into their small conversational circle. “This is Technoblade. He saved my life.”

“Technoblade,” Ian says, staring at him for a moment and then thumping his fist to his chest once, giving a short bow. “Thank you for your service to the Empire.”

“Oh, uh,” Techno says, awkwardness permeating every word. “I’m not a soldier.”

“You still saved Phil’s life,” Ian says, recovering over that bump quickly. “Service enough. I have no idea what we’d do if both you and your dad died in the same week,” he quips, giving Phil a little nudge in the torso. He chokes out a nervous laugh— then nods quickly.

“Yeah, uh, that wouldn’t be ideal,” he admits. Techno gives him a look that he pointedly ignores. “Techno is going to be sticking with me for now. He’s smart and good with a sword, and well-read. Try and keep him away from the court, though.” Aside, to Techno: “It’s miserable there. I hate it. You’d despise it.”

“Noted,” Techno drawls, and Ian snickers.

“Also noted. He stays with us. While I’d love to just get a drink and hang out, it’s been... a little insane, these past few weeks,” he says, and then reaches out to pat Phil’s shoulder.

Phil grimaces. “Yeah,” he says. “I was expecting that.”

“You’ve got a couple meetings and the advisors are expecting you,” Ian says, and there’s a moment where he switches from best friend mode into advisor mode. He’s not officially one—there’s a council that sits right below the king, and he’s too young to be on it, but Phil knows he’d prefer Ian over them any day. They start to walk across the plaza, Ian leading the way as he continues talking, Phil next to him and Techno trailing along behind them. “The funeral’s going to be held in three days. And then your coronation the week after. It’ll be quick, but most of it is prepared already. You don’t have to do much— color schemes, honestly, and some papers that need signing.”

“Ugh,” Phil murmurs, his fingers clenching already in sympathy for the days to come. “Okay.”

“You’ll also be moved into the emperor’s rooms,” Ian notes, lifting his own hand up like he’s checking things off an imaginary list. “Cooks will need to know about the feast. The king of the Isles will likely attend, and the committees from the Vaults. Anyone you specifically want to invite needs to be noted down like, today, because the messengers already went out.”

“I can’t think of anyone,” Phil says, feeling the rush of responsibility land on his shoulders with all the weight of a spring avalanche. “Uh. Techno?”

“Yeah?” Techno asks, shuffling up behind them a little quicker.

“No, no, I mean– I want to invite Techno,” Phil says. Ian nods.

“Course,” he says. “Easy enough.” He glances back and makes a face. “You’re going to need new clothes. Do you have some?”

“Phil said the exact same thing,” Techno grumbles, crossing his arms. “What’s with you guys and *taylorin’*?”

Ian laughs, bright and happy. Phil cracks a grin as well. “I like him!” Ian crows, snickering as they head up the stairs towards the main door of the facade. Guards pull the handles open, and with little fanfare, Phil steps into the main hall.

“Yeah,” he says, tipping his head up and back to stare up at the frescoes of the main entrance room, paneled wood flooring gleaming in the midday light. Painted faces of his ancestors and his subjects stare down at him, elegantly recreated and captured in time a hundred years ago. He can see some of the paint cracking– he’ll need to have someone come in and do repairs. Techno is openly gaping again when Phil glances back at him, and Ian keeps prattling on as they cross the floors and descend further into the palace.

He’s home.

Phil loses Techno eventually. He can only keep track of him for so long, as Ian herds him around the palace to get various things done, and Techno needs to get accustomed to the place as well. When he asks about it, Ian tells him that Techno’s getting a room and all the normal stuff, and so Phil tries to put his nerves for the other out of his mind.

Techno will be fine. He can handle himself.

It’s just so much easier to worry about something like that than everything else going on. There are so many people to see and talk to, advisors and courtiers and people cloaked in red expressing their grief to him. Phil’s not super upset– he’s sad, yes, it’s his father, but he lost his mother years ago and the man had been distant at best so he’s not exactly gripped by the throes of loss at the moment. He’s quiet and reserved enough so that people think he’s grieving, but really, he’s calculating. Calculating what needs to be done when, so that at the end of the afternoon, he and Ian can catch a break and slip away.

He’s not actively grieving, but seeing his father’s body is something strange in itself.

They take a moment in the chapel, where he’s laid out, and Phil goes in by himself. Ian watches the door and promises to come if Phil calls for him– but he wants to see him first.

His father is dressed opulently, laid out on a bed of chrysanthemums, pale blue and red, icy white in a wreath around his head. He wears a silver crow broach on his chest. His eyes are

shut and his skin pale as a ghost— when Phil holds his hand out over his head and nose, he can't feel a breath.

Truly dead then. Phil blinks at him and then sits down in one of the frontmost pews, inhaling sharply.

“Dammit,” he murmurs after a while, burying his forehead in his hand. “Why did you have to— dammit.”

It's too *soon*. He doesn't feel ready, but there's no time left for him to prepare. His father is gone and with him, any guidance that Phil could possibly ask for. He's been prepared for this his whole life, sure, but that doesn't mean he's ready for it. He knows in theory how to run a kingdom the size of the Empire, but when he thinks of it, he thinks of it still as his father's kingdom, not his own. It doesn't feel real.

Phil sits there for a while and tries not to think, staring at the corpse of his father and making sure to keep breathing.

The sound of the chapel doors closing startles him, and he turns, ready to bite at whoever's entered, but it's just Ian. His friend makes his way to the front and lays a hand on the corpse's display, a whispered prayer, and then sits beside Phil.

“Prime came for him in the morning,” he says absently. Phil nods. He'd read about it in the letter— some kind of internal issue, a problem with his heart that the doctor's hadn't known about. He'd been dead before he hit the floor. He hadn't even eaten breakfast yet. “It was quick.”

“It was dishonorable,” Phil mutters, fingers clenched together. “He should've gone in battle or something.”

“There are no battles to fight at the moment,” Ian points out. “We're not at war.”

“Rebellions in the countryside, something, I don't know,” Phil says, despondent. It feels wrong. His father shouldn't be dead from a betrayal of his own body— it's not right. His father was so much more than that. His throat feels weirdly clogged and thick, and when he presses his hands to his face it's warm against his palms. Speaking through the thickness, he says, “It just doesn't make sense, Ian, I wasn't— I wasn't even here. I was hiding, trying to run, and we— I should've been here.”

The thickness is overwhelming to the point he can't speak anymore, choking on the last word as his breath hitches. And it's then that Phil understands what's happening: he's sad.

His father is dead, and he's sad.

Ian's hand is warm and gentle on his shoulder. Neither of them speak for a while, the only sounds echoing around the chapel room are the sniffing and faint noises Phil keeps making accidentally as he tries to keep the tears back. It's all so much, and he hasn't been letting himself feel it, forcing it back into a place he can keep it all locked away so he can keep it

together. He has to keep it together— for Techno, for the Empire, for his people. He’s going to be Emperor in less than a week, and it’s all so much.

“Hey,” Ian mutters after what feels like an eternity. Phil wipes at his face, quickly clearing it of any dampness. “We’ll do this together.”

“Together,” Phil mutters, staring up at the dais and his father, the pale, cold skin. His eyes are shut and hollow, skin lightly purple at his fingertips and around his nose.

“You’ve got a meeting,” Ian prompts gently, and Phil inhales, and then exhales.

Shove it all away. He can do this. He has to do this— there is no choice for him.

The doors are huge and wooden, spiraled carvings of gods and fantastical myths from farther north stuck in them, bordered by crows. Phil watches as they shut behind the last advisor, and the soft *whoosh* of clothing and hushed voices carries around the room. Ian isn’t here with him— it is just Phil and the council, his advisors at hand. After a minute or two, the men start to settle into their seats.

The table they sit at is long and rectangular. Phil sits at the head of the table; the seat his father sat at not a week ago. The chair to his right is empty. It’s where he would’ve sat, once. In session with these same advisors, listening and giving input when he thought necessary. He’d learned a lot in this room. The stone walls encircle them, keep them enclosed, and trap in the lingering heat from the lamps and fireplace at the other corner of the room. Behind him is a window, and Phil knows if he were to turn around and gaze out of it he could see all of Osprey, the lake, and Mount Veyna in the distance.

He doesn’t turn to look. Instead, he stands, hands braced on the wooden table as he gazes across the men in front of him.

“Your Majesty,” one of them says, before he can address them. When he looks over, it’s Pete, his graying head of hair and salt and pepper beard familiar beyond measure. “Our condolences.”

“I’ve heard that quite a lot,” Phil admits. “Thank you. Not just for that, but— for being here.” He can do this. His fingers might be jittery, but this is not the first time he’s sat council with these men. Some of them have watched him grow up. They aren’t strangers. Pete even smiles at him, lips stretched and cracked from the chill. “We have a lot to attend to for the coming weeks, so I’d like to skip any formalities and get right into it, if we can.”

“Of course,” Pete says. He’s being rather talkative— and it makes sense. Phil’s got to pick a new right hand, and while his father had chosen a lord by the name of Arlus Finch to serve faithfully for many years, Phil’s not sure if he’ll uphold it. Pete seems to know that. (There are many people he’d rather have as his right hand, but he’s not sure the rest of the advisors would, ah, approve.) “Before we do get into it, however. The idea was brought forth to me that perhaps... and I mean no offense by this, Phil, but perhaps your coronation could wait a few years. Simply until you turn twenty-one.”

Ah. Right. Yeah, well.

“Many of the Empire’s rulers before me were crowned early,” Phil says lightly. “My own great-great-grandfather was only eighteen.”

“He was,” Pete acknowledges, a dip of his head. “But his father was also here to guide him. Simply put, we wished to know if you felt that finishing your studies would better prepare you for the job.”

“I am nearly finished anyways,” Phil says. He’s been on tour for a bit with the army, yeah—but that doesn’t mean he’s incompetent. He inhales—these men will not see him as young and foolish. His father might be dead, sure, but he got a good decade of teaching Phil how to be Emperor before then. “While I appreciate the concern, I don’t imagine I’ll need the extra time. It would only serve to weaken my claim to the throne, which *should* be uncontested regardless, and allows for cracks in the unity of the Empire. The people need someone to be there for them, and I am that person. I am ready to take the throne and serve as Emperor. I have been ready, and though I know I have much to learn, I still believe that the job is no better suited for anyone but me. My father may be gone, but I am his son, and through me the reign shall live on. A three hundred year line will not be broken simply because some wished for me to wait to have the crown placed on my head.” Phil lets his words sink in, feels the power behind them, and scans his eyes over the room. No one challenges them, and so he finishes: “Does anyone else want to comment?”

A soft chorus of *nos* echoes across the room. Phil nods once—Pete is watching him, eyes sharp as blades, and when Phil raises a brow he shakes his head.

“No, your Majesty.”

“That’s all, then,” Phil says, and he moves to sit in his father’s—

In *his* chair.

“Let’s get through the rest of the list, then,” he continues, fingers tapping across the table.

king of kings

Chapter Notes

thank you antimony_medusa for looking this over!

btw i should let you guys know that any and all characters that show up that aren't phil, kristin or techno (ie pete, calvin, ian, tapl) are basically gonna be ocs sharing the names of those people!!!! their personalities will be basically whatever i want them to be bc i 1. don't have a lot of source content to pull from and 2. need people to pad out the world :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He has no idea where Phil went.

The idea is giving him more anxiety than he'd ever admit. Something about saving the guy's life in the middle of the woods had made him sort of paranoid, and the fact that Phil is now a friend of his— and Channel knows Techno doesn't have many of *those*— has made him more anxious over this disappearing act than he probably has any right to feel. It's not even like Phil has really disappeared. He's just off doing the things he needs to in order to become emperor.

Because Techno's new best friend is the emperor of the entire country. What is his life.

He's coming to terms with this as he sits in his new bedroom. He gets one of those, now, instead of a bunk in some kind of halfway house or basement. He gets his own bed with soft cotton sheets and more pillows than he's ever seen in his life, and the room is big enough for him to lie down on the floor and spread his arms and legs out fully. He's not even close to touching any of the walls when he does it. There's a lit fireplace and a couch.

It feels a bit wrong, sitting on the couch. Which is why he's currently on the floor, having pulled back the lush carpet to the wall and instead presses his hands to the cool stone floor. There's no one here to look at him while he does it, so he's less shy about the silly ritual of comfort he feels like he has to perform.

Somehow, it hadn't felt real while they were traveling. As though the man Techno had met in the bar of an inn and the Phil he saw greeting Ian in the plaza of the Imperial Palace are two separate people. But that's not true— they're one and the same. Phil is his friend, and he is also emperor, and Techno feels very out of place.

He's not going to let it stop him. He can't let it stop him. He has a job to do, and that job is to protect Phil— which he should be doing right now, but he can't because according to a good number of palace staff he needed new clothing and a bedroom and lots of other stuff. He's pretty sure a guardsman gave him a tour, but the rooms and hallways have already melded

together in his mind, a grand melting pot of blue and white and cold stonework and paintings and tapestries. He's pretty sure if he tries leaving his room, he will immediately get lost.

Still. Not going to let it stop him.

The door thunders when it shuts behind him, a great booming sound that makes him flinch. He'll have to figure out how to be sneaky. Adapt to his surroundings. He's good at that.

When he looks down the hallway to the left, it is open and empty. On the right, a guard stands tall in a corner, sword sheathed by their side and hand resting casually on the pommel. Techno is suddenly ultra-aware of his own weapon hanging by his side, wickedly sharp and painfully unadorned. Almost self-consciously he readjusts his scabbard and makes his way down the hallway towards the guard. They don't move, don't even look at him as he passes by— they simply stand at rest, and Techno walks through the hall and turns down the next one.

On and on, repetitive. The hallways all seem to be the same, and he tries to remember his tour from earlier, but the memories are fuzzy with stress and anxiety. He can feel his stomach twisting the more steps he takes, the more unsure he gets. The tapestries all blend together, giant mishmashes of color and stories, horses and knights and snowy hillsides and—

“Technoblade?”

His head snaps to the side. A man is standing at the other end of the hallway he's found himself in, brown hair swept back, concerned look on his face. Right. Ian. This is that man's name, the one Phil hugged with fervor upon their arrival. An old friend?

“Yes,” he says, struggling for the words. “Yes, that's— me.”

“Sure is,” Ian says, and he steps forward, making his way down the hallway. “Are you looking at the tapestries?”

“Sure,” Techno says, because it's better than saying *I am hopelessly lost in this labyrinth you call an imperial palace*. “Tapestries.”

Ian arrives next to him— he's shorter than Techno by a good half foot, but he seems to take up more space with personality alone. He smiles, glancing up at the length of fabric above them, and rocks on his toes. “Phil sent me to find you,” he says. “But your room was empty.”

“Got bored.”

“Figures. There's not much for you to do at the moment. You've been dragged in at a busy time.”

Techno turns to him, and Ian keeps his eyes on the tapestry. “You said Phil wanted me? Why?”

“No clue.” Ian shrugs, looking at him. “He's fond of you, though. What happened, exactly? When you saved his life?”

Techno winces a bit, rubbing at the back of his neck. “It wasn’t anything,” he says. “He was drunk, told me he was the crown prince, so I started to walk him back to the army’s camp when an assassin came out of nowhere and— well. Y’know.” Casually, he drags a thumb over his neck. Ian laughs, loud and echoing, and then raises a brow.

“Y’know?” he asks, mimicking Techno’s action. Techno nods— what was so funny about that?

“I could’ve done better,” he says, a little frustrated as he glances back up at the woven fabric. The colors all mix together in his vision. “I could’ve kept one alive. Asked them who sent them, cut off a piece of their insignia. Figured out where they came from. Next time,” he says assuredly, and when Ian laughs again it startles him, flinching a bit.

“Hopefully there won’t be a next time,” Ian says, grinning as he looks up at Techno with a gleam in his eyes. He’s not sure what to think about that look. It’s something he’d expect to see on Phil, too, which is worrying for any antics they might get up to together. “I’m starting to see why he asked you to bunk up,” Ian continues, still with that grin, and Techno warily starts to follow him back down the hallway when he gestures to follow. They walk side-by-side, Techno’s hand still resting on the pommel of his sword.

“I’m not sure I do,” Techno says warily.

“Maybe not yet,” Ian hums, and then turns on his heel to lead him up a fancy flight of stairs and towards a big, intricately carved wooden door. All he can make out are feathers. “Come on.”

Inside, there are a bunch of men sitting around a big table. At the head of it sits Phil and behind him, a window looking out over the entirety of Osprey. Techno’s eyes are drawn everywhere at once— the faces of what can only be the council members, each and every one of them staring at him. Ian walks in confidently, head held high, and Techno tries to follow suit but the weight of their gazes feels like stones tied to his shoulders, making him want to flinch inward and hunch to carry the burden. He can feel their scrutiny, and it makes him want to scream. Or maybe punch something.

“Techno,” Phil says, and that, at least, is a kindness he’s familiar with. “There you are. Ian, thank you for kidnapping him.”

“My pleasure,” Ian says, leaning against one of the columns that lines the room. He looks to be at ease, and Techno aims to mimic that.

“Techno, c’mere,” Phil says, and he steps forward, around the table to his side where he gestures. “Lords of the council, this is Technoblade— ah, just Technoblade. He saved my life while I was journeying home from two assassins.”

“I only took care of the one,” Techno protests, and Phil rolls his eyes.

“Still. He is someone who deserves your respect and kindness. Techno— my, uh. My memory of that night isn’t that great. Would you mind describing the insignia the assassins wore? Or telling us anything you can recall?”

Hm. They’re trying to figure out who did it, then. Techno wishes, for the second time today, he’d had the foresight to grab one of the corpses and drag it along back to the camp with them. Instead, he now has to stand in front of a bunch of scrutinizing old guys and wrinkle his nose as he tries to recall the symbol.

“Do you have paper?” he requests after a moment. Phil slides him a quill, ink, and parchment. He leans down, dipping the pen in the ink and scribbling what he can from memory. It’s fuzzy and coated in the frosty reminders of blood on the snow, but he manages something distinctive enough, he thinks. Something vaguely bird-shaped? He pulls back— slides the paper over to Phil, who looks at it and nods. He moves it across the table some, and some of the council lean in. For a moment, there’s silence.

Then, one of the older-looking men leans back in his seat with a huff and scratches his salt and pepper beard. “Probably a sect of the Blood God’s cult,” he says gruffly, and Techno feels all the blood in his body turn to ice. “Still angry about the fact your father blew them out of the woodworks those years back.”

“It’s not,” he blurts out before he can stop himself. All eyes in the room are suddenly on him again, and Techno— Techno’s not sure what to do. Panic races through him, heart jackrabbiting, and he gnaws on his lip before inhaling. “It’s not.”

The salt and pepper man raises a brow at him. “No?” he asks. His eyes slide from Techno to Phil. “And how are you so sure?”

“I—” Techno stammers, still unsure. He could play it off, he could, but explaining the whole *I grew up under the god’s tutelage and fought for it* seems like something he doesn’t want to say in this room. A bit explosive. He’d probably get thrown out the window or something. “I’ve seen them,” he settles on. “What’s left of them. They don’t use insignias.”

“You’ve seen them,” the councilman says, and Phil raises a hand. Techno looks down at him, terrified for a brief moment as he takes in the confused and slightly concerned look on his face. They stare at each other for a long moment, and then Phil mouths something. Techno has, frankly, no idea what he was trying to say. But he— he nods, trying to express something other than fear and uncertainty in his posture.

“We’ll have some of the priests look at it,” Phil says after a long silent moment of staring at Techno’s face. He looks away, back down at the scrap of parchment, and drags a finger over the now-dry ink. “And a couple librarians. Thank you, Techno.”

“Welcome,” Techno breathes. It doesn’t feel like the danger has passed— he still feels like he’s treading the edge of a knife, feet cut to shreds beneath him. Before anyone else can say anything, he says, “Is that all?”

“Yes, that’s all,” Phil says. “We still have some things to discuss— Ian, take Techno down to the yard, will you? Set him up with some of the soldiers.”

“Course.” Ian, who Techno had forgotten was even in the room, pushes off the wall and moves over to him. Techno meets him halfway, desperately trying not to look like he’s running out of the room, but there are technically only two exits he can see and he does not want to go out the window. He might be able to climb and topple a couple of those columns if he tried, but he doesn’t want to. He just wants to leave. Phil was right– he hates court, or whatever this equivalent of it is. Ian pushes the doors open for them and they exit, the stares and whispers behind them like a burning brand on his back.

The moment they’re around the corner, Ian looks up at him and in a conversational tone, asks: “So, are you a cultist?”

“It’s not a cult,” Techno argues immediately, because the tone indicates that Ian knows. They all know. A second later– “And no. No I’m not.”

“Right.” Ian sounds unconvinced.

“Not *anymore*. ”

“So you were?” Ian asks, turning to walk backwards down the hall with his hands clasped behind his back. Techno bites back the urge to shout at him, and settles for rolling his eyes.

“What gave it away?” he asks, and then promptly buries his head into his hands. “They’re gonna kill me, right?”

Ian is quiet for a minute, and when Techno lifts his face from the warm cradle of his palms, he’s just kind of standing there. Neither of them are walking anymore, and for some reason, Techno’s heart drops from his chest to his feet. Man. Maybe this was a mistake. Maybe he should’ve let the emperor die.

No. No, that’s dumb. He likes Phil, and Phil likes him, and– and they’re *friends*. That has to count for something, right?

“I’m not sure,” Ian says slowly, carefully. Like he’s talking to a street dog. It makes Techno want to bare his teeth and snarl. But before he can, Ian continues, “Let’s just go down to the yard. Phil can deal with all of that, okay?”

“Yeah,” Techno says, mouth dry. He doesn’t seem to have any other choice, in the heart of a palace that might suddenly hate him. “Alright.”

He does like the yard. Soldiers mill about, uncaring and loud and uncouth, and it is here that Techno finds a place. Somewhere to fall into the rhythm of violence and settle his head, dig his feet into the sandy floor of the sparring rings and push soldiers to their limits. It feels good– the muscles in his body burning, the smell of iron and grit between his teeth after he gets knocked to the ground. The smell of hay and horses and dung and sweat, sour and acrid in his nose. Mixed together, it’s unpleasant, but when Techno tears it down to its bare essentials it is perfect. He can lose himself in rhythm, here.

Somehow, he ends up with a small band of soldiers in a sparring ring, beating the crap out of each other. Ian practically dumps him and flees, and a few of the men in the yard recognize him from the trip back from the Kirnach. They ask for pointers and fights in turn, and after the others see them at work he's flooded with young soldiers, their bright eyes turned to him.

It's kinda funny. He's definitely younger than most of them, but he wins the majority of the spars they host. Before long, there is a cheering, clattering mess of men standing on the rails of the fence around the ring, or sitting in the grass after being defeated as Techno completes a winning spree of thirty-four.

"You're insane," one of the younger soldiers says, a kid who can't be older than him. It's his most recent victory— the kid's voice is muffled by the sand he's lying face-first in. "Bet you can't shoot better than me, though."

"I'll take you up on that," Techno hums, reaching down to grab him by the scruff of his leather tunic and haul him to his feet. "Anyone up for thirty-seven?"

No one steps forward. The kid grins, teeth smeared with dirt, and elbows him gently. "Pussies," he shouts, and there are a couple heckles thrown out by the crowd they'd gathered. "C'mon!" the kid crows again. "Who's gonna face him, huh? This fuckin' monster? No one's going to take down the beast?" Techno grins, bares his teeth, and for a long moment, no one steps forward. There's cheers and more heckles and laughter, and though the words strike some hidden part of him, he leans into it for now. The kid shouts again. "Fuckin' pussies!"

"I will."

A voice rings out, and someone pushes through to the break in the fence. Techno grins, ready to toss a couple good-natured insults toward them and break their spirit a bit, but before he can the crowd falls silent.

"Oh," Techno says, as Philza stands, sword in hand. "Hey, Phil."

"Thirty-seven?" Phil asks, stepping forward. Techno barely registers the kid scurrying away, eyes wide in the face of his to-be king. A few brave soldiers call out, words lost to the air as Techno shakes out his shoulders and backs up a few steps, giving Phil a little room in the sand. He swings his sword in a circle, once, and nods.

"Thirty-seven," he says. Phil tightens his grip on his sword.

He fights like he talks.

It's the first thing Techno notices about Phil as they clash together— sand under his feet, slide, push forward, metal on metal— he fights like he talks. Fast and clipped and sure, cutting corners to let loose fraying edges through, not fighting dirty but bending the rules in his direction like a willow bends in a storm. Techno's arms and shoulders ache with effort and exhaustion, and Phil is renewed and full of energy, but he doesn't let him get a swing in. Parry, slash, down on one knee and roll as someone kicks up a mouthful of dirt and Techno considers getting it in Phil's eyes but before he can grab a handful, a shout from the crowd

throws him off and then fades again into the background as he stands back up and turns. Protect his back, shuffle to the side, account for the protective leather they're both wearing.

Parry, slash, repeat. Phil fights like he talks— desperate to be listened to, to be respected.

Techno considers letting him win.

But then they pause for a moment, swords caught against one another and before either of them can wrench away, he catches Phil's eye. It's gleaming with adrenaline, a bright star of blue against the gray and brown background. He doesn't look mad or upset— just like he's enjoying the challenge.

So Techno tosses that idea to the wind. He doesn't let people win anyways. Only losers pretend they're not better swordsmen than the literal emperor.

It ends like this: a wrenched wrist, a noise of pain from Phil, and a sword thudding to the ground a few feet away. A surprised gasp from the crowd that Techno tunes out as he levels his sword evenly with Phil's chest, and raises a brow.

"Uncle?" he asks. Phil stares at him, then breaks into a lopsided grin.

"Mate," he says. "Uncle, yeah, sure. *Mate.* "

"Thirty-seven," Techno says, slamming his sword down into the sand and letting it waver there with the force of it. "I'm done."

"You look exhausted."

"You have good men. They give good fights."

Those good men are currently heckling and cheering, only a little more subdued than before the emperor had shown his face. When Techno turns to look at them and raises his fist, a cheer goes up so loud amongst them that he cringes and nearly covers his ears. Phil is grinning at them, and when *he* reaches over and swings Techno's arm back up into the air, the cheer is deafening.

"Oh, they love you," Phil says. Techno snorts a laugh.

"They just like watching the fights. They don't like it when I beat them."

"So make them better," Phil says, letting their hands drop and turning to look at him. "Think you could do that?"

Techno shrugs, looking out over the now-dispersing crowd. He spots the kid from before in it, and when their eyes lock, he raises his hands as though he's holding a bow and mock-shoots it towards Techno. Then grins, and gives him a thumbs up. Techno gives him one in return.

"Maybe," he says.

“An emperor demands honesty from his generals,” Phil says a second later. Techno looks back at him, and the sudden hard set to his gaze. “If I asked you where you learned to fight like that, would you tell me the truth?”

With that same rising dread he’d felt earlier, Techno nods. “If you asked,” he says. And he means it. He would.

Phil says nothing. Even as Techno stands there, watching him, he just turns his head to the sky and notes the angle of the sun, glancing around them as people return back to the busy work of keeping a palace afloat. Techno waits, the dread inside him curdling, but Phil says nothing. Phil asks nothing, and eventually, he moves. He picks up his fallen sword and shoves it into the sand next to Techno’s, a pair of steel markers, and then glances at Techno.

“Dinner?” he asks. Techno stares in confusion.

“Phil?” he asks. Phil raises a brow at him.

““Sup?”

“Are you going to ask?”

“Not at the moment, no.”

They fall into silence again. Phil looks up at the sky, then back at Techno.

“Well?” he asks.

Techno is going to lose his mind, he thinks.

“Yeah,” he says. The dread has turned in his stomach, from something sour to something... not quite sweet, but not quite salty, either. “Dinner.”

He doesn’t eat.

Everything is too... much. Too much color, too much flavor, too much food. He’s pretty sure he’d get sick on it all. The table is spread with an enormous amount of it, more food than he thinks he’s ever seen in his life, honestly. Maybe only at celebrations, or festivals. Nothing ever meant for him.

Phil and him sit at the table, Phil at the head, him on the right. It’s quiet for the most part, although Ian arrives halfway through and makes Phil laugh so hard he spits wine up his nose before leaving again. He pokes and pulls at the things on his plate, unsure of what half of it is, and waits.

He’s not sure what he’s waiting for exactly. But he knows that when it comes, whatever it is, he’ll know.

“So,” Phil says. “You saw my council, then.”

“Yeah,” Techno says. He pauses, chews on his words for a moment. “Those are the people who run this place?”

“The ones who are supposed to help me run it,” Phil says, shrugging. “Not that they always do a great job, but I’ve known most of them since I was a child, so.”

“They seem hateful,” Techno says before he can stop himself. He can still hear the vitriol in the one man’s voice— *a sect of the Blood God’s cult*— and while beating the crap out of a bunch of noob soldiers had helped, the memory hadn’t faded. Phil looks at him, then sighs.

“Nah,” he says. “Not hateful. Scared.”

“The Blood God’s followers hardly even *exist* anymore.”

“You would know?”

Silence reigns. Phil is staring at him, and Techno looks away. There’s no shame in it— no fear. Or at least, he tries to convince himself of that.

“You said I could ask,” Phil says, and he doesn’t sound angry or upset or tired. He sounds sad, which is a thousand times worse.

“I did,” Techno admits.

“And you said you’d tell the truth,” Phil continues.

“Yeah, I did.”

“Still holds?”

“Do I look like someone who’d break an oath?” Techno snaps, raising his head. “You were in there for hours after I left. I know your men said things to you and this isn’t— this isn’t the road and you can’t pretend to be an army man here. If you don’t believe me, then you don’t. But maybe they just put it in your head— you might benefit by telling them to stop meddling. I’d do it myself.”

Phil looks up— looks at him now, not down at his plate. Something furrows between his brows, and Techno’s heart skips a tiny beat. The flood of words is gone, and behind it he feels raw. A little scraped dry, on the inside.

“Clear the room,” Phil says. Techno sits there as a number of servants trail out, and finally the guards, shutting the door behind them with an ominous thud. Techno waits, silent. He doesn’t think speaking right now would exactly be the smartest thing to do.

Eventually, Phil says something. He has to— Techno already knows him, and he knows he can’t keep his mouth shut.

“Can I trust you?” he asks.

“Yes,” Techno says, no hesitation, no stammer. The truth rings like a bell on his lips, tingly, fuzzy, as though he’s just had a sip of beer.

“Are you sure?” Phil asks, and Techno frowns. That hurts, a little.

“I would die for you,” he says easily.

“If you tell the council members to stop meddling, you just might,” Phil says, setting down his cup with a grimace. “I don’t like it, but I can’t change it at the moment. I haven’t even been officially crowned yet. The power lies in my hands, I guess, but a lot of it also lies with them.”

“So put me on your council,” Techno says. It’s not... he doesn’t really want that, but maybe—

Phil laughs. Bright and beating and melancholy. “Yeah,” he says. “I wish. You and Ian both.”

“Even when you think I’m still a Blood God freak?”

Eyes trail to him, blue and sharp. “*Are* you still a Blood God freak?”

“No.” Techno looks down. The meat on his plate oozes— not raw, just the juice of a cooked slab of flesh. He drags his knife through it, the scrape of metal on ceramic making his teeth hurt. “I was born into Hypixel. The last sect out there. They raised me, and I fought, and I won, and I left.”

“Did they kick you out?” Phil’s curious, not disgusted. That’s got to be a good sign.

“No, I left,” Techno reiterates.

He can see it now— the walls of Hypixel’s pit, smooth stone and sandy floors to soak up all the blood. The smell of people and of death, the sounds of a city above their heads. Blood-red cloaks and white tunics stained with all manner of things. A desperate people. A people he loved. He thinks he still might.

“I realized it wasn’t what I wanted,” he says quietly. “The worship, I could do. Ringing the bell, praying, sacrifices. I still—” *I still do*, he doesn’t say. *Just not where anyone can see.* “There was... the man in charge, he... told me to go. Not because I had broken any rules, or done anything wrong. Just because he told me I could do more.” He grips the handle of his knife, smooth and cool under his fingertips. Nothing like a sword. Finer than any blade he’s held in his life, and it’s an eating utensil.

“He wasn’t wrong,” Phil says. He’s been listening quietly, and when Techno turns his gaze to him, he looks thoughtful. “You’re here, aren’t you?”

“Sure,” Techno says. “We’ll see how long that lasts.”

“The soldiers like you,” Phil says. “And I want you on my council.” He sounds thoughtful now, which can only be dangerous.

“Phil,” Techno says, a warning.

“They can’t argue with me,” Phil says, grinning. “I’m Emperor.”

“Not *yet* .”

“Just about.”

“ *Phil* .”

“Technoblade.”

“I don’t want–”

“I want you to be one of my generals, Techno. Your Emperor demands it.” He’s smiling, and Techno feels a little helpless as he stares at him, wide-eyed and unsure. He can’t– can he say no? Will Phil make him do it? There’s a sparkle in his eye that makes it seem like it’s a joke, but he can’t quite tell. He freezes up in the light of his stare, hands hovering and mouth hanging open. Phil’s grin drops after a minute, and he reaches out to slap him on the shoulder. “Come on. Just say yes, please?”

“I’m not–” Words fail for another moment, before he can collect himself. “I’m not anyone,” he says.

“Do you have to be anyone?” Phil asks. “Where’s your ambition?”

“I don’t always agree with the things your government does,” Techno tells him warningly, and he thinks... he thinks he might be considering it. Phil just beams wider.

“Good,” he says. “I’ll need someone to disagree with me sometimes. Put me in my fuckin’ place.”

“Do you promise I can quit? At any point?” Techno asks, just to be sure. He doesn’t know if he will or not, but he wants... he can’t feel trapped. Not in this palace, not where he still feels so out of place.

“Always,” Phil tells him. “But I’d be sad if you did. So maybe don’t?”

“No promises,” Techno says dryly. He swallows, shuts his eyes, then opens them again. “Alright. If that’s what you want.”

“I want it to be what you want too,” Phil says, leaning forward. “Please, Techno.”

He thinks about it. He thinks about it, and thinks about the city he lived below, the people in the tunnels and sewers beneath, the poor and hungry and cold. He thinks about their trip back into the capital, with Phil by his side and people bowing. He thinks about their flowers, and the men sitting around the council table, and all of the people who will die this winter because they couldn’t feed their families.

With a place at Phil’s side, he could change things. Not just with a sword, either– he could change tangible things. Change without conflict.

Maybe Hypixel was right.

Do better. Be better.

“Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, I want it.”

“He put you on his fuckin’ council?” Ian asks as they walk down the hall. Beside him, Phil’s cloak is billowing, a cocky grin on his face.

“Jealous?” Techno asks.

“Not a bit,” Ian says, leaning back as they walk and blowing out a stream of air into the early mid-morning corridor light. “Didn’t you tell me to keep him away from court?” he asks, the question posed to Phil.

“Yeah,” he admits. “But council’s not court, is it?”

“No,” Ian bemoans. “It’s worse.”

“You’re making me feel so confident,” Techno mutters, reaching up to tuck a strand of hair behind his ear. “I already feel like I’m being thrown to the wolves.”

“Or the crows,” Phil says. “Don’t worry. You’ll be fine.”

“I feel like an idiot,” Techno says, scowling a bit. “And I look like one too.” The clothing that had been picked out for him... well, he’s not really a huge fan, one could say. It’s fine, the cloth smooth, and a short cape around his shoulders would make fighting hard he knows. His boots are entirely impractical. Phil just grins though, and Ian claps a hand on his shoulder so hard he flinches from it.

“You look like a noble,” he says. “Which is good, because you’ll be the only one in there who’s not.”

“Maybe we can change that,” Techno mutters. Phil laughs.

“I can only make one groundbreaking, controversial Imperial decree a month,” he says. “Sorry ‘bout that.”

“What’s even the point?” Ian bemoans as they arrive at the door, moving to open it for them. “Having friends in powerful places isn’t fun unless they bend the rules for you a little bit.”

“I’ll remember that next time you ask for something,” Phil teases, and Ian rolls his eyes as the doors swing open and they make their way into the council room.

It's exactly the same as it was before— a little dark, deep, intricate stonework decorating the walls and columns. No one else is sat around the table yet, and Phil settles himself down on the chair at the head of it, running his fingers over the top. Techno... Techno knows the other chairs are full, so he opts to stand at Phil's shoulder, parade rest, waiting. After a moment, Phil twists, turning to look up at him.

"I had an extra chair pulled in," he says. Techno glances over to where he gestures, the innocent-looking seat more like a bear trap.

"I'm good here," he says, and pretends like his guise of protecting Phil isn't actually just hiding behind him.

"If you're sure," Phil says, sounding slightly amused as he turns back around. Techno nods—he's sure.

Before long, the other council members file in. Some of them come in pairs, some alone. Techno notes who is chatting with who and the glances they all shoot his way— only one smiles, the older man with a peppery beard. Once seated, the chatter mostly abates, and Phil is left at the head of the table wearing a somber smile and lounging a bit as he waits.

"Alright," he says. "Let's begin."

"If I may, your Grace," the man with the peppery beard says. Phil nods. "We seem to have an open chair."

"It belongs to the newest member of the council," Phil says smoothly, and turns. Techno meets his eyes and then glances up, then back down. "The most recent general of our Imperial Army."

Silence reigns instead of Phil, just for a moment. Techno can feel their eyes on him like fire and he grits his teeth, bears it, and then raises his head once more. He meets each and every one of their eyes in turn— they seem to be waiting for something, hesitant to speak.

So he does instead.

"It is an honor," he says, stilted and unsure.

"Your Grace," Peppery Beard says, quieter now. "I do not want to challenge your decisions, but is this not a child?"

"A warrior who has seen more blood and battle than most of you," Phil says smoothly, turning to face them all again. "Technoblade is someone I trust."

"Is that wise, your Grace?" one of the other councilmen asks, splaying his ring-laden hand on the table. Techno quietly notes the insignia he wears. Another lord of some sort. "If I recall, you haven't known him long."

"He saved my life," Phil argues. "And he inspires the men."

“Does he know how to lead an army?” Peppery Beard is raising a brow. “Or anything about politics?”

“I know enough,” Techno snaps before he can bite it back, the sharpened edge of his anger cutting like steel. “I know the people you claim to serve, and I know your failings in doing so. I know the land, the people, the blood and veins of the countryside. Is that enough to rule? Do you put stock in knowledge like that, sitting high up here above the grit and dirt?”

“Techno,” Phil says warningly, but he continues, already on fire.

“I’ve lived through things you could never imagine,” he snarls. “I’ve taken men’s lives in a much more direct way than I believe you ever have. I’ve seen the harbors and ports and farmed in the fields during summer. I might be young, but is His Majesty not young? Would you doubt his wisdom when he brings it to the table on matters of politics? I may not be of noble blood, or raised to know how to dance and speak and write properly, but my lived experiences will bring a perspective you cannot understand to this table. Problems you have never seen, nor cared to see. All your bleedin’ noble hearts can respectfully, fuck off.”

One could hear a pin drop in the silence that follows. His own words ring in his ears, vibrating like a string on an instrument that’s been plucked, and his heart echoes it. He can feel the thrum in his ears as he waits, gaze flicking from man to man as they sit there in an appropriately stunned manner. Even Phil is quiet, watching Techno with the slightest of smiles.

Peppery Beard is the one who breaks it. He leans back in his chair with a huff of laughter and a whistle.

“Your Grace, I like him,” he says.

“Thank you, Lord Peter,” Phil says, and the rest of the council relax a bit, but some of them are still staring warily at Techno. “Thank you for speaking your mind, Technoblade.”

“Yeah,” Techno breathes, blinking hard. He kind of thinks he might pass out. “Of course, uh, your Grace.”

“Sit, kid,” Lord Peter says, gesturing. Techno hesitates, wanting to linger more by Phil’s side— but something about the look he’s getting from Phil and Lord Peter both makes him shuffle over and gingerly pull out the chair to sit. The man next to him, older with strange eyes, nods quietly. “Well, let’s see how you do. Your Grace, we’ll start with the treasury’s report—”

Council is very boring.

To be fair, Techno wasn’t expecting much. By the time they file out, his mind is reeling with different things. Numbers and names and plans and decisions. He hadn’t offered much to the table in that time, too busy looking back and forth as the members of the council had discussed various things, but he’d put his input in once or twice. He thinks it went well.

The man he'd been called Peppery Beard stopped him before he'd left, introduced him to a few members. Lord Peter Voiceover had intelligent eyes and a firm handshake, and had insisted Techno call him Pete. The man he was sitting next to was Lord Arlus Finch— the one with the strange look in his eyes whenever he looked at Techno. Another notable man was one who just went by Fit— he wasn't a lord either, nor of noble blood according to Pete. A mercenary turned Imperial Captain, who'd fought against the Blood God's members alongside the former Emperor years ago. Techno had regarded him warily, but Fit's introduction to him had been warm and kind, calling Techno something of a *kindred spirit* with an amused tilt to his lips.

Escaping the council members might be the hardest part of the meeting, actually. Techno has to try and weasel and worm and white lie his way out of their grasps, eventually relying on Ian coming over eventually to take him by the arm and lead him away.

"The lords are kind of overbearing," Ian grumbles as they walk down the hall away from them, grinning despite himself. "They seem to like you, though."

"Not all of them," Techno points out. "I think some of them think I'm..."

"A young, violent, traitorous upstart?" Ian finishes for him. "Yeah, sure, why not. Are you?"

"No," Techno says vehemently.

"There we go," Ian says, patting his arm before letting go. "Go beat up some idiot recruits and work off some steam." That actually doesn't sound half-bad, honestly, and Techno makes a face as he's left in the middle of the hall. Yeah. Beatin' up recruits. That sounds nice right about now.

"—security for the event entails. We— are you listening, your Grace?"

Techno watches as Phil drags his gaze away from the window behind him to the table once more, frowning slightly as he does. Techno is frowning too; this is their hundredth council meeting of the week it feels like, the number of them increasing by the day as it gets closer and closer to Phil's coronation. The anticipation is hanging in the air like herbs out to dry, fragrant and evident in every corner of the palace. People rush to and fro every hour of the day, banners being put out to hang and flags draped from windows in blue and silver and white with dark corvids in the center. The people in Osprey below can feel it too, the mourning sessions petering out as they ready themselves for celebrations instead. There's only one night left, and then it'll be time. They're all feeling it, Techno knows, but Phil seems to feel it the most.

"Of course I'm listening," he says, shifting to sit once more in his chair. "Continue, please."

Pete narrows his eyes for a moment, then continues. "... security for the event is in place, for the most part. The Imperial Guard will be covering the palace, and the soldiers will patrol the streets nightly in case of any rowdiness. It should be fine, but we were wondering if an extra guard should be placed on you tonight."

"We should," Techno cuts in. He's still not used to the way people look at him when he speaks— as though they're actually listening. Even Phil is staring at him, the cloudy distractedness faded entirely from his eyes. "There's no shame in being overprepared," Techno says. "I could be assigned to the unit personally."

Beside him, Lord Finch snorts.

"Is it really necessary?" he asks. "Everyone loves you, your Grace. And they know the palace will be fortified heavily for the next fortnight. Why on earth would someone try something now?"

"Because they know we will think exactly that," Techno fires back. "If they're smart, they'll expect us to also be smart. Someone already tried to take his life. I was there."

"As you continue to mention," Finch says, sighing. Techno leans back in his chair, biting his tongue so as not to start an argument, but Pete seems to pick it up for him.

"The little general is right," he says, and Techno also tries not to be insulted at that. "Being over prepared is not a bad thing. Technoblade, assign yourself if you wish. You are in charge of them, after all."

"And what does his Majesty have to say on that?" Finch asks, looking over. Techno does as well— Phil is staring at him, bags lining the underneath of his eyes. He looks exhausted. Techno feels it.

"I trust your judgment, Techno," Phil says, waving a hand. "As long as tonight I am left *alone* for Pete's sake—"

"My sake, your Grace? What honor."

"— *thank you*, Pete, then I don't care. Assign whoever and however many you want."

"Noted," Finch says dryly, glancing at Techno. Techno glances back and shrugs, resting his hands on the table. They move on from there, but Techno doesn't stop noticing the way Lord Arlus Finch is looking at him, eyes narrowed and scrunched, face conflicted. Eventually he stops, but Techno...

He's not sure. Something doesn't sit right with him.

He brings it up later, when it's just him and Phil. They take dinners together, as Phil had expressed in an exhausted state a few days ago that technically he'd eaten dinner with his family before, but he has no family now except for Techno. That had been... a lot to process, but he'd taken it in stride and told Phil in no uncertain terms that he was his family, too. A lot more awkward than that, admittedly, but he thinks the point had gotten across.

Now, as he digs into a piece of meat pie, he thinks carefully before he speaks.

“Lord Arlus Finch,” he says, breaking a companionable silence. “What’s up with him?”

“Hm?” Phil asks.

“Lord Finch,” Techno says again. “Who is he? What’s his deal?”

“Arlus,” Phil repeats, looking minorly confused. “Ah, he’s— an old family. The Finches have been with the Empire as long as my family has been. We’re family, him and me. By marriage.”

“Just wonderin’,” Techno says, spearing a piece of unidentifiable vegetable.

“Wondering why?” Phil asks, leaning forward.

“He keeps lookin’ at me,” Techno says. “It’s not a— not a crime, I guess, but he’s weird about it. Don’t think he likes me much.”

“I don’t think Arlus likes anyone very much,” Phil says, shrugging. “He’s nice outwardly, but. You know.”

“Mm.” They fall into silence once again. “He fought hard against extra protection for you,” Techno says quietly.

“Is that why you’re irked?” Phil asks with a sly little grin, leaning forward. “Really, Techno?”

“He should want to protect you!” Techno argues, and Phil laughs, shaking his head.

“It’s fair for him to point out other places guards could be,” he says, and before Techno points out that he hadn’t actually said anything of that nature, Phil continues, “Just because you disagree doesn’t mean much. It’s fine. I think we’re all just tired and stressed. It’ll be over tomorrow, and I’ll officially be Emperor, blah blah.”

“Blah blah,” Techno repeats. “You’re going to rule the Empire and all you have to say about it is blah blah?”

“I think I’ve said a lot about it in the recent hours,” Phil says dryly, and Techno laughs. He has to admit that’s true— still smiling, he looks down at his plate. “I’m going to retire,” Phil says, lifting his cup to his mouth a final time and nodding. He places it back down, and Techno watches the way the light glints on the crest molded into it as he does. “Goodnight, Techno. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Goodnight,” Techno says, a little distracted. Something is nagging at him. As Phil gets up to go, flanked by Imperial Guard, he turns. “Wait.”

“Yeah?”

“Lord Finch— what’s their crest?”

Phil shrugs, not even looking back. “A finch,” he says, as though it’s the most obvious answer in the world. The door shuts behind him, and Techno sits.

He sits for a while. Just thinking, looking down at the hilt of his own sword, which remains un-emblazoned to this day. He’d gotten a better one when he’d arrived, but his original is still in his room. Compared to some of the other knights, who carry swords covered with crests and insignias, his own is empty.

It dawns on him then. Something that had been nagging him. Lord Finch— he doesn’t wear a crest at all. Most of the other lords do, some little nod or acknowledgement to their banners, but he doesn’t. He’s as empty as Techno is, as though he has no family at all. Which is strange, if his family goes back as far and as greatly as Phil had told him.

Finding Ian is difficult. Getting Ian to drag him to the library is even harder, because the stupid idiot keeps fighting him on it.

“Aren’t you supposed to be with Phil?” Ian argues as he opens the door to the room for him. Techno pushes inside, and scans the walls— crests line them, banners of families that have sworn loyalty to Phil’s family for years. He searches and searches until he sees it— a finch, with two crossed claymores behind it. He stares at it for a long, long moment, wondering why it seems so damn familiar.

“Techno?” Ian asks, and then his heart drops out from under his stomach.

He *has* seen this crest before. In the woods, in the darkened, bloody snow, half-stitched onto a dying man. He’d been a little drunk, and Phil had too, which explains why neither of them had recognized it— but here, now, in the lantern light with the knowledge in his head and no alcohol muddling his memory—

“We need to find Arlus Finch,” Techno demands, grabbing Ian by the arm and dragging him out of the room, not stopping when he yelps. “And Phil. We need to get to Phil.”

“What?” Ian asks. “Bloody— what, why!?”

“The assassins from the woods,” Techno says simply. “They wore finches on their breasts. Lord Finch is related to Phil by marriage. Who’s next in line for the throne if Phil dies?”

Ian’s eyes go wide, and after a moment, they start to run.

Through the darkened halls, down the steps and to the wing where Phil’s room is. Techno is relieved to find the Imperial Guard still at the door, both of them standing tall and firm. He stops in front of the doors, and lets go of Ian in order to let them both catch their breath.

“We need to see his Grace,” Techno demands.

“A moment,” one of the guards says, turning and knocking.

“He already has a visitor,” the other guard says.

“What?” Techno asks. “Who?”

“Lord Fi—”

He doesn't wait a syllable longer. He pushes past both of the guard, ignoring them clamoring for him to stop and Ian yelling behind him, slamming the doors open with all his weight.

Inside, Arlus Finch is standing with a knife in hand. His back is to the door, blade pressed against his own back and Phil standing by the fire, a book in hand. They both snap to attention as Techno bursts in, voices fading out into nothing. Finch's eyes look from him and Techno looks down at the knife, then back up. Realization snaps into place like a lock for both of them.

A flash of movement, and Arlus launches himself toward Phil with a yell, knife out. Techno matches him in kind, throwing himself forward and tackling him from behind to the floor. Phil yelps, scrambling away and towards the other side of the room as they grapple for a moment. Arlus is taller than Techno, bigger by far, but Techno fought in the pits. He fights dirty, unlike a knight. He pulls hair and ears, the knife slashing across his arm as they roll and his head bumps into the leg of a chair. They rip apart— someone is yelling, and the sound of metal unsheathing fills the room as Techno stumbles backwards. He's bleeding— blood drips hot down his arm but he doesn't care, can't even feel the pain as Arlus Finch staggers to his feet and pauses. He looks at him, then his eyes flick to the side and Techno glances over too. The two Imperial Guard are there, swords drawn, and Phil is with Ian behind them. Safe.

“Finch,” Phil snaps. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“You're—” The man's chest heaves, eyes wide and wild. “You're too young. Your father never would've wanted this. Without you, I become king by succession, and that— if you're not going to—”

“That makes no sense,” Techno says, shaking his head and staggering back further.

“You,” Arlus says, leveling his knife with Techno when he speaks. “Fucking cult freak.”

“Yeah,” Techno says, breathless. Phil is next to him in the next second, a hand on his shoulder and the other gripping his bleeding wrist. The Guard descends on Arlus, and he shouts as they disarm him with ease and slam him to the floor. Techno looks down on him and his writhing, furiously red face, and still breathless, nods. “Yeah, I am.”

The next morning, Phil is crowned Emperor for all eyes of the Empire to see.

He kneels on the steps of the Imperial Palace and recites the sacred oath that all kings take on the Continent— promising his life, his duty, his word. The head priest of Her Lady Prime bequeathes him a crown of moonflowers, the ones that grow in the darkest nights up north, and slings a cloak around his shoulders made of white fox fur. He shines brilliantly in the sun, turning to the people gathered below the steps and raising a sword as they cheer.

Techno is among those on the side, watching as Phil steps down and grins in the face of his people. His own arm is bandaged neatly by the royal physicians, and beneath them, Arlus Finch rots in a cell, awaiting his execution the next day.

There is only one punishment for treason, after all.

Beside him, Pete is smiling too.

“I never thought I’d see the day,” he says quietly as Phil begins to speak. Techno’s heart is filled with something looking at him— a deep sense of loyalty, maybe. Responsibility. He glances over at Pete, who bears a chest full of bright medals and a proud expression. “Once because I thought his father would live long enough for us both to retire. Then another time because I thought his life was potentially at stake.”

“I wouldn’t let that happen,” Techno says fiercely, and Pete laughs softly, just so he won’t be heard under the booming sound of Phil’s voice. Neither of them need to listen to the speech— Phil had read it to the council this morning as a trial run.

“I know,” Pete says, looking out at the crowds. “You proved that last night. I’d been keeping an eye on Arlus for a while, but I never thought he’d attempt anything.”

“He was running out of time,” Techno mutters. “I should’ve connected the dots faster.”

“The mind is a tricky thing,” Pete says. He claps a hand on Techno’s shoulder, gentle. “Don’t blame yourself. He was lucky to have you.”

“I don’t plan on going anywhere,” Techno says fiercely, still watching Phil as he turns and beams in their direction. Techno, after a moment, smiles back.

“I see,” Pete says, thoughtful but distant. His fingers squeeze Techno’s shoulder.

The sunlight is so very, very bright.

“I see.”

Chapter End Notes

SURPRISE techno pov!!!! hehe they SWITCH get FUCKED u get BOTH POVS! my special little boys. i was so tired of them not being friends like cmon trust each other instantly and all that shit but. its sorted out now :) theyre besties forever!!!!!!!!!!

:) nothing can go wrong :) this is a happy story....

-

will update every friday!

if you're enjoying, be sure to subscribe to both the story and me on ao3 :) i post cool stuff and do cool things. also maybe follow me on [twitter](#) where you can come and say hi!!!! as well as a [tumblr](#)! ask me questions and shit i love to know what you're thinking!

or, consider joining the [discord](#)!

antecedent also now has a [playlist](#)!

til blood

Chapter Notes

btw i should let you guys know that any and all characters that show up that aren't phil, kristin or techno (ie pete, calvin, ian, tapl, simon) are basically gonna be ocs sharing the names of those people!!!! their personalities will be basically whatever i want them to be bc i 1. don't have a lot of source content to pull from and 2. need people to pad out the world :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

25 YEARS, 5 DAYS, 19 HOURS BEFORE EMPEROR PHILZA DECLARES WAR ON THE OPUS ISLES.

Somewhere deep in the woods, a rabbit hops.

To and fro, pure white. It snuffles in the snow, the well-worn tracks of a game trail keeping it oriented. This way and that, as it searches for a tiny bit of green underneath the cold winter blanket of snow that is laid over the land. Frost dots its nose and the inside of its ears are a pale, pale pink. Its eyes are red.

With a thunk, an arrow lands in its side, pinning it to the ground. A third, bleeding eye joins the other two in crimson harmony.

“Good shot,” Techno comments from behind, sitting astride a pale brown mount. Phil thinks it’s named Carl— one of Techno’s favorites these days.

“Thank you,” Phil hums, lowering his bow and eyeing the rabbit as it twitches in death throes. Around them, the forest is quiet and still, white with snow that fell only last night. Phil had watched it from his window, the fat flakes making the lights of the city below disappear behind a shadowy fog.

Being emperor comes easy, it turns out. Especially in times of peace— thanks to his father and grandfather, there is little conflict between the Empire and their neighbors, most of the diplomacy left to the embassies and various messengers sent between. Phil has overseen a few things when it comes to their neighbors— mostly the Isles, frugal, persnickety bastards that they are. Not that he doesn’t like the men from the Isles. He most certainly does, but they can drive a hard bargain when it comes down to it.

Techno’s been good to have. He muses on it now as he watches him slide off Carl and make his way over to the rabbit, pulling it up from the ground and giving it a shake. Removing the arrow from its body and tying it to his belt, feet hanging low. His hair is longer now— still pink, but instead of brushing his shoulders it hangs to his lower back, even when braided up

against his head. Phil's own hair has grown out as well, and he keeps it up most days, but today he lets it hang loose in the frigid breeze.

Time has shaped Techno to the curvature of the north. He's sat on Phil's council for what, five years now? Not only has he gained a healthy glow to his skin instead of the pallor he'd joined up with Phil with, but he's gained confidence. Many of the soldiers in the palace have been trained under his brutal but steady hand, and it shows.

Phil's reign has been one of prosperity. He intends to keep it that way.

As Techno remounts Carl, Phil turns his head back the way they came. He cannot see the whole of Osprey from here, but he can see the clocktower rising high above the trees. They begin the journey back, having wasted most of their morning chasing small prey. The deer are few and far between this time of winter, but the elk can be plentiful if one knows where to look. Phil isn't looking for a large hunt today, though, and before long they can see smokestacks mixing in with the trees and clocktower, and the spires of the palace beyond that.

"Back to civilization," Techno says mournfully, and Phil laughs.

"You sound disappointed," he teases, and Techno heaves a long-suffering sigh.

"If I could live out in these woods, I would," he says.

"Liar," Phil hums. "You'd get too cold and come back in a week."

"I think you underestimate my stubbornness," Techno says, steering Carl closer to Phil and his own mount. She's a gray mare, softer-tempered than Carl. Techno reaches out with his foot, kicks Phil's leg with his boot and leaves traces of snow on his pants. "I could do it."

"I really don't think you could," Phil counters, grinning.

"Are you *tryin'* to make me stay out here?" Techno asks, riding ahead a bit and glancing back. "'Cause I will. Don't get me wrong. But I'm also not about to leave you alone in the palace."

"I'd have Ian," Phil points out with a laugh. "And Pete. And Fit. I'd have plenty of people to keep me busy. You could live it up out here, all by your lonesome. I'd bet you'd like the quiet above all else."

"The quiet," Techno scoffs. "It would be nice for a moment of that."

"Wouldn't it," Phil laments. "What do you think will be the bane of your existence next? A tournament?"

"Rather than a court session," Techno says. As the snow turns to slush beneath their horses hooves, and the small game trail to road, the trees thin out. Their bickering goes back and forth for a while as they ride, laughter filling the air and Phil is...

He's content. There are plenty of things to worry his mind, but right now, there is little.

Until Techno goes stiff, and the sound of hoofbeats in the mud cuts through their cheery conversation.

“Royal colors,” Techno says, pulling Carl around in front of Phil and narrowing his eyes. Phil slows, and the horse and rider slow as well as they approach.

When it gets closer, Phil recognizes the person sat atop.

“Fit,” he calls out, and Fit nods in turn. “What brings you out here?”

“Looking for you, your Grace,” Fit says, slowing to a halt in the middle of the path. They linger there for a moment, and the look on his face makes something in Phil falter. Something like doubt. After a moment, Fit speaks again. “There’s a messenger from Helton. They come bearing news.”

“Is anything wrong?” Phil asks

Fit’s expression darkens. “Something like that,” he says. Techno glances over his shoulder at Phil, hair pale pink and splayed over the white of his cloak, and Phil purses his lips.

“We should get back,” Fit says, guiding the reins of his horse to turn it around. “You’ll want to hear it from the source.”

Their footsteps echo in the main hall of the palace, mixing together with the rush of servants and bustle of people that flow around them. Phil’s boots are muddy. Techno still has two dead rabbits on his belt.

“Your Grace,” Pete says, waiting at the steps of the dais. Phil claps him on the shoulder, fingers still a little stiff from the quick and cold ride back to the palace. He takes a few steps up, then turns. Pete and Techno wait at the bottom— beside them, two messengers step forward, *kharvaa* covering their faces but not hiding their red-rimmed eyes and messy, frozen hair.

“Speak,” he says, gesturing to the first one.

“Your Highness,” they say, stepping forward and ducking their head. “A message from the lord of Helton. Three nights ago, a group of people rose up within the town and slaughtered fifteen families.”

Silence falls over the room. Phil’s breath catches in his chest.

“They left behind this,” the messenger continues, holding out a scroll to Phil. He takes it, and slowly unrolls it, peering down at the mark left behind. “Scrawled on the doors and walls in blood.”

Phil closes his eyes, then opens them again. “And you?” he asks, mouth dry. The other messenger steps forward, and he takes that scroll as well. He doesn’t have to open it to see what’s written inside.

“The same, your Grace,” the other messenger says. “They say they wore red cloaks.”

Phil inhales, then exhales. Looks to Techno, who looks pained, but is hiding it well. Then to Pete, and Fit, who are grimacing.

“Call a council meeting,” he says.

“It’s the damn Blood God,” Pete says, slamming his hand down on the table. Phil pretends not to notice the way Techno flinches. “We eradicated those cultists years ago, and yet they’re still rearing their ugly heads.”

“Stop,” Techno says suddenly. His hand is curled into a fist, scowling deeply at the wood. “Whoever’s doing this doesn’t serve the Blood God. Not really.”

“And you would know?” Pete asks. “I wonder why.”

“People still serve the god,” Techno argues. “Anyone you and the former Emperor killed were extremists. Or, well—” He grimaces. “Most of them were.”

“How kind of you not to hold a grudge,” Pete says, and Techno slams his hand down on the table and rises up.

“Would you like me to?” he asks, voice booming through the room. His eyes seem to be on fire. “Would you like me to detail how you killed families who had nothing to do with the terror? People just trying to live their lives? Men, women, children? My own—” He inhales, and Phil has suddenly heard enough.

“Enough,” he says, moving to stand himself and throwing out a hand between them. “Both of you, *enough*. Pete, sit. Techno— stop.”

Techno is breathing hard, as though he’d just run a mile in the snow. Pete sits slowly, with a resounding thud. Neither of them look away from one another.

“We have a problem,” he says. “An unfortunate problem, but a problem nonetheless. I cannot let my people be slaughtered.”

“They don’t serve—”

“Regardless if they did or not, I would not stand for it,” Phil snaps. “They killed children.”

For a moment, it seems as though Techno might argue. Phil doesn’t know if he can handle it right now— he lifts his chin and Techno grits his teeth, a standoff that neither of them want to break. Phil’s afraid he might have to pull rank to get him to stand down, or worse, send him out of the room, but after a moment, Techno sits.

“I can’t let this be overlooked,” Phil says carefully. “How many men can you spare from the Guard?”

Techno inhales, then exhales. “Forty,” he says.

“Add a hundred from the reserve army and send them out to Helton,” Phil says. “If that can’t quell it, or at least discourage it, we’ll have a bigger problem.”

“And if it comes to be a bigger problem?” Techno asks, now carefully not looking at Phil.

“Then we’ll do what my father did,” Phil says. “But only if it comes to it.”

Without a word, Techno gets up and leaves the room. His steps echo— the doors slam. The moment he’s gone, Phil leans back in his seat. He feels as though all his strings have been cut, and it doesn’t help when Pete speaks up.

“Better dead than quelled,” he says.

“Pete,” Phil says, and he can’t keep the sharpness from his voice. “Shut the fuck up.”

He finds Techno in the hall outside, pacing. Sword in hand. He keeps his distance.

“Hey,” he says. Techno stops, but only for a moment, and only to barely look at him.

“It’s not them,” he says, almost frantic. “You gotta understand that, Phil. It’s not.”

“Not who?” Phil asks, and Techno stops fully now, swinging his sword out to the side and scowling.

“The Blood God,” he says. “It’s not what they want. It’s not. They might be blood but they’re not— the killing, the senseless violence, it’s not what they want. There’s no place for that.”

“What do they want?” Phil asks, almost... hesitantly. He’s not sure why, but Techno’s eyes look reddish-brown in this light. It makes him want to keep his distance.

“They want violence,” Techno says, voice a little raspy. “But not like that, Phil. Not like that.”

“Is that why you fought in the pits?” Phil asks, and Techno nods, once. His hair is coming undone— wispy around the edges, ragged on the ends.

“Simon said it would keep them at bay,” he whispers. “He was right.”

“Techno,” Phil says. He’s never faced uncertainty like this— Techno has stopped pacing, but his eyes are as wild as ever. He glances around, making sure no one has seen any of this, and then reaches out. Takes Techno’s forearm with his hand, grasping it tight. “Hey. Listen to me.”

“You don’t understand Phil,” Techno says. “I haven’t heard the God since I was a kid. But recently—”

“You heard him?” Phil asks, and Techno’s fingers tighten.

“No,” he says softly. “*Them*. A thousand of them, all craving blood. It started quiet, and I thought I was wrong, but... I wasn’t.”

“How can I help you?” Phil asks. He could— he can’t ask the high priests about this. It isn’t concerning Prime, as far as he knows, and they’d just claim Techno was a heretic. Hell, Technically Techno is a heretic. Phil should throw him out of his court and have him killed for good measure, but he—

Techno is his friend. Techno has proved himself invaluable a hundred times over. He’d rather take this secret to his grave.

“I just need them to stop,” Techno whispers, desperate. His nails dig into Phil’s arm like brands, and they burn like it too. “They’ve been wild since you got the news.”

“How did you stop them before?” Phil asks, and Techno inhales with a hiss. “Right. The pits. I can’t— I can’t do that for you.” The grip on his arm reaches a blinding peak of pain, and then falters. Phil grips back. “But I can give you this. Come on.”

“What?” Techno asks, as Phil starts to drag him down the hall. For a moment his sword makes sparks as it bounces on the stone floor, but Techno learns their pace quickly and lifts it up.

“Keep that in hand,” Phil says warningly. “You’re gonna need it.”

“Where are we going?” Techno asks, and Phil weaves through the hallways with ease, making sure no one sees them as they go. Through the stone and wood and tapestries filled with stories of gods and men and magic, and down to the kitchen and even farther than that. Stomping through the mud of the stables and ducking past haybales until—

“There’s a door here?” Techno asks as they push through the creaking gate.

“Small one,” Phil says, and they break through into a small wooded area. The snow has fallen even here, and their breaths puff out in the chill. He lets go of Techno’s arm and backs up, unsheathing his sword. “It’s quiet here. I used to come as a kid in the spring. It’s not a garden, not quite, but—”

“Phil,” Techno says, a little breathless.

“Come on,” Phil says. He’s not sure what he’s doing, not really, but he can at least hold his sword out and nod. “‘Til blood.”

“I can’t—”

“You can, and you will. It’s what you need?”

“Phil, I can’t,” Techno says again, a little more desperate. “What if I go too far, what if I—”

“Kill me?” Phil asks, huffing a laugh. “I’d like to see you try. I need you to be clear-headed, Techno. I need to solve the problem we have at hand. We can’t solve it if you’re screaming for blood like your God.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Techno says again. Phil just shakes his head slowly.

If Techno won’t start it, then he will.

With a quick foot, he skids through the snow and slashes down at Techno’s shoulder. His breath comes hard— and Techno reacts, swords clanging against each other so hard Phil can feel the rattle in the bones of his wrists and fingers. They pause for a moment, stuck close together, and then something in Techno’s eyes flash crimson.

He fights back. Phil would consider it a victory, if he wasn’t such a vicious sparring partner. He and Techno have fought a hundred times before, but this is nothing like those times. Now, Techno seems untouchable. Where Phil might’ve gotten a hit in once or twice before, he can barely get close now. Techno is a whirlwind of energy and movement, the snow and chill not even stopping him as they clash.

Lunge. Quickly, there. Duck to the side, parry, draw back. Phil’s on the defensive and he knows it, but he gives Techno a fight. It wouldn’t be fair not to at this point. But despite that fact, he doesn’t last long. Techno’s blade cuts through his sleeve and leaves a long gash down his upper arm, dripping bloody hotly into the snow. It steams as it falls, and Phil takes a couple quick steps back. For a brief, terrifying moment, he thinks Techno won’t stop. That he’ll keep going, and Phil will have to actually defend himself or call for help.

But then, just as he’s leaning forward, Techno stops. He’s panting hard, but his eyes are clear.

He drops his sword.

“‘Til blood,” he says.

“Did it help?” Phil asks curiously, dropping his own sword into the snow. The blood is leaking down his arm, soaking into his sleeve and shirt and spilling out over his fingers.

“Yes,” Techno says, exhaling hard and then sitting down right in the snow. Phil moves, going over to sit with him, and he doesn’t miss the way Techno’s eyes track the blood on his fingers.

“Can you...” he trails off, still unsure. “Can you explain it to me?”

Techno turns to him then, a wry smile gracing his lips. “How am I supposed to explain in words what it feels like to be the vessel of a god?”

“So the men who killed in Helton,” Phil says. “They weren’t real followers of the Blood God.”

“No,” Techno says, shaking his head. “Or, if they are, they’re... misguided.”

“What should I do about them?” Phil asks, and Techno sighs.

“Your idea was good,” he says. “Dissuasion. But I don’t think it’ll work. You’ll have to put them down by force, which might be a task. Who knows how far their gospel has spread. I could...” he trails off, but only for a moment to grimace. “I could track down Simon and ask him.”

“Simon,” Phil repeats. “That’s the second time you’ve said that name. Who is he?”

“You might know him as Hypixel,” Techno says, and Phil raises a brow. He does not, in fact, know that name other than from things Techno has offhandedly said. Techno laughs, quiet and exhausted, but it’s a laugh. It makes Phil feel... better. “He’s who I grew up with,” he explains, and Phil nods.

“Ah yeah,” he says. “Him. Right. Okay. So we hunt him down and ask him about it.”

“If we do that,” Techno says. “I need your assurance Phil, I need you to— I need to know you won’t hurt them. Hypixel’s a good one. Everything he does is transparent, people sign up for it. They choose it. It’s controlled.”

“I promise,” Phil says. He slings an arm around Techno’s shoulders, and doesn’t pull away when he tenses up. After a moment, the tightness dissipates, and Techno slumps into him. “I promise.”

“I’m glad you’re my friend,” Techno says, and he sounds tired. Phil’s gonna get some food into him before sleep if he can, but it might be a close call. He laughs, clenching the fingers of his injured arm and feeling the sting of it echo up to his shoulder. The red blood on the snow shines bright, and when he closes his eyes, he can still see it.

Later that night, Pete will come to him.

“Your Grace,” he says, entering the room after the guards let him in. Phil is sitting up at his desk, penning a response to the Lord of Helton, and moves to get up. “No, no, please. Don’t get up for me.”

“Pete,” Phil says. “How can I help you?”

“I wanted... to talk to you about your general,” Pete says. Phil raises a brow— then gestures to the lounge. Pete takes it as the offer it is and moves to sit, Phil rising from his desk to sit in the chair opposite.

“What about him?” Phil asks. He can feel his hackles raising just slightly, but Pete just smiles at him.

“He’s got spirit,” he says. “A good asset to have in wartime.”

“We’re not at war,” Phil says carefully.

“Not yet,” Pete says. “But with the way things are going—”

“Killing a few extremist heretics isn’t war,” Phil counters. “It’s a necessary action. One that must be upheld every decade or so.”

“It’s still conflict,” Pete says. “And you’ll have people saying you didn’t act fast enough, no matter how fast you do act. There’s no winning, not for you. Especially not if they found out you put a heretic on your council.”

Phil wonders, vaguely, how long it would take him to cross the few feet of space between him and Pete and cut his throat. Not long, he thinks— maybe twenty seconds? Less? But Pete’s a fighter and would see him coming. Case in point, his eyes are on Phil right now, careful and almost wary.

“I know he’s your favorite guard dog,” Pete says. “But he *is* a heretic.”

“Call him a guard dog again,” Phil says, layering threat over every syllable that comes from his mouth. “See what happens. You served my father well, Pete. I’d like you to keep your job.”

“You fight against the title of dog, but not the other,” Pete says. “Interesting.”

“I won’t deny what once was true,” Phil says, bitter to even admit it. “But Techno will prove invaluable. The attacks— he knows how to help. I’m not about to turn that help down.”

“But he knows how to help because he was part of it, once,” Pete says. “Not just part of a cult, but a traitor to it too.”

“Why do you argue so hard against him?” Phil asks. “It’s not like I haven’t seen you two get along. Hell, I’ve seen you two *drunk* together, like proper mates.”

“This isn’t about whether or not I like him,” Pete says. “It’s about whether or not he’s a danger to your reign.”

“Techno has served me for nearly six years now,” Phil says. “You’ve been there for almost all of it. And you think he’d give it up for a cult he’s not even a part of anymore?”

“I don’t know,” Pete says. “And that’s the problem.”

“Well I know,” Phil says firmly. “I trust him with my life, and with good reason. He’s saved it twice.”

“Longer cons have been played,” Pete points out.

“Then I’ll trust you to be there if it ever goes south,” Phil says, moving to stand up. “But it won’t. If that’s all of your concerns, then...”

After a moment of silence, Pete stands up as well. His eyes are heavy, dark, and he watches Phil as though he's looking right through him. "I'll see myself out," he says. "Goodnight, your Grace."

"Goodnight, Pete." He watches as he goes, the doors heavy behind him. Phil sinks back into his chair— soft, inviting, and his eyes close of their own free will. He's tired, and there's still so much more to think about.

It wasn't like he didn't know. He'd known from the moment he'd seen him fight Techno had likely worn the red cloak. He doesn't anymore. Phil's seen him attend the Channel's worship halls more than once, and he keeps a bell in his room for private prayer. Techno's devotion to the faith is evident, and if one weren't looking hard enough they wouldn't see the dredges of what was left behind. Phil himself hardly remembers most days, because it doesn't matter. Most of the Blood God's worshippers were culled by his father almost fifty years ago, and those that did remain practiced in secret. Techno is just evidence of that. He easily admits that maybe some of the tactics his father employed were brutal. Pete is evidence of that.

And yet, he's seen them get along. That part was true. There's something to be said, he thinks, about what ale can do for comradery.

Doesn't mean the next year isn't going to be difficult, but.

Phil closes his eyes and rests. He thinks he's going to need it.

The next morning, he oversees the exodus of soldiers from the plaza.

They make a pretty picture, lined up in neat rows of ten. Headed by the Imperial Guard, mounted on horses and armor polished to a shine. Techno stands beside him as the sunlight glints off the metal and Phil walks down each row of them, offering out handshakes and encouragement as Techno checks for imperfections. Their orders are clear— arrive in Helton respectively, and enforce a curfew. The Guard will work on tracking down what red cloaks they can, and the rest of them will serve as reinforcements and security for the townspeople.

"Remember," Phil says, standing in front of them. "Your job is to protect them. Protect your countrymen, and let them feel safe in their own homes at night. They are the ones who run this Empire, not me or you. They are the ones who build cities from the ground up. I would be nothing without them, and without me, there is no you. We owe it to them to make their homes safe." With that, he steps aside, giving a nod to the gate. It opens, and the plaza is suddenly filled with the thundering sound of hooves and armor clanking as the soldiers move forward and are led out of the gates and into the streets of Osprey. The wind from it snaps his cloak open and Phil closes it again as the chill seeps in, frowning almost absently as he watches them file out.

He hopes it works. He really, really hopes it works, and that they don't have to take any drastic measures. Just because he hopes, though, doesn't mean it'll happen. Hope is a funny thing. He might be more inclined to call it wishing, like kids do, because that's all it is. A childish prayer that things will work out in his favor.

To be fair, a lot of his life has been in his favor already. He's hoping (hah) the luck doesn't run out now.

"So," Phil says as the last soldier gallops out of the gate. "Find Simon, yet?"

"No," Techno says from his side. When Phil looks over, he's frowning too. "It's been a day. If anything, he's still back in Turnstones, and a regular messenger won't be able to find him."

"I think you're underestimating our birds," Phil says teasingly, and Techno shakes his head.

"No, I'm serious," he says. "They keep a tight ship. I should just head south myself and find him."

"If you do that, I'm coming with you," Phil says. Techno again, shakes his head.

"I should go alone," he says.

"Bullshit," Phil says. "Mate, I'm not letting you go alone. Besides, I'd like to meet this man myself if I can."

"If they hear the emperor's coming, then neither of us will see him," Techno says. Phil raises a brow.

"So the emperor won't go," he says. "Easy enough."

"Phil." Techno is leveling him with a look. Not just any look— The Look, the one that means Phil is about to suggest a stupid plan and Techno will go along with it anyway. "Phil."

"Techno."

"*Phil.*"

"You and I will go down by ourselves. Nothing wrong with a little vacation."

"They need you here! And it could be dangerous—"

"And I'm not some helpless waif, Techno. C'mon, mate, give me some credit." Phil shoulders him with a laugh. "It's not the first time I've done it!"

"I know," Techno says dryly. "It's how we met."

"It won't take long with just us two," Phil reasons. "We can travel faster alone. I'll spread a rumor we're going north instead, up to— Raven's Flight, maybe. A week trip to the fort to gather soldiers. I'll send Fit up there instead."

"And leave Pete here?" Techno asks. Something about his voice makes Phil pause, turning to scrutinize him. "What?"

"What is it with you two?" Phil asks, scowling. "You've been bickering like an old married couple lately."

“Irreconcilable differences,” Techno says dryly. Phil barks out a laugh.

“Well *I* think you two are more similar than you want to admit,” he informs him. Techno makes a face like he’s just bit into a surprisingly soft apple. “It’ll be okay. We can leave tomorrow for Turnstones and be back by next week.”

“I still think this is a bad idea,” Techno mutters, and the sunlight fades as they walk into the palace once more. Phil sighs, tipping his head back. Of course Techno thinks it’s a bad idea—he tends not to take risks, Phil has noticed. Never acts impulsively, always thinks things through. Phil likes that they balance each other out like that. Not that Phil is impulsive, though. He likes to think things through as well, but in this case, he’s curious. He wants to know more about Hypixel, about where and how Techno grew up. The added bonus of having it help with the problem on the coast—well, it seems like a golden opportunity.

And Phil’s family crest isn’t composed of crows for no reason.

“It’ll be fine,” he says, clapping Techno on the shoulder. “Go get things ready for us to leave, and if anyone asks where we’re going, tell them it’s Raven’s Flight. Except Ian. Ian’s coming with us.”

“Oh, come on,” Techno groans, but he nods. “Fine. Yes. Ian is coming too, sure. This trip will be a nightmare.”

“That’s the spirit!”

—

They leave the next morning, bright and early.

Phil had talked to both Fit and Pete last night. To Fit: “I need you to go up north, bring back one hundred fifty from the fort at Raven’s Flight. And send word to Tantwell from there, asking for more men.” He mentions nothing about himself leaving, and that’s exactly how he wants it to be.

To Pete: “I’m going up north with Fit, Techno, and Ian. You’re in charge.” He’s expecting them to figure it out, of course. They’re not that stupid. He just needs time to get away first. And it works— a pat on the back, a sneaky exit early in the morning before either of them have woken up, and they’re on the road.

“I still think this is stupid,” Techno mutters. The sun is kissing the mountaintops as they ride, most of the snow slushy on the road by now. They’re taking the southern pass around Osprey, meant to connect up to Cardinal Road South and then head to Turnstones from there. It’s longer, but less conspicuous than taking the ferry across the lake. Prettier, too, Phil thinks personally. He loves the way the mountains look in early winter, before the snow has trapped them all far up north and the snow falls down for days on end. It’s picturesque. It’s his.

His country. His kingdom. His people.

Ian and Techno ride behind him as they go, the trip passing quietly as all three of them focus on waking up. By the time noon hits and they're definitely through the pass and south of Osprey, they've all woken up a bit. Ian has insisted on singing for the past hour, so Techno has taken it upon himself to "scout ahead" and leave Phil behind in the dust with the great musical Ian Bealio.

"I'm starting to regret inviting you," he says wryly, in a break in the unfortunate music.

"Nah, you're not," Ian says back with a wide grin. "You're glad I'm here. Otherwise it'd be dead silence with Grandpa up there."

"Grandpa?" Phil asks, laughing. "Are you serious?"

"He's an old man!" Ian argues. "He goes to bed when the sun is barely down! He wears glasses, Philza. Glasses."

"So do you," Phil points out, and Ian rolls his eyes.

"Not square ones," he grumps, looking ahead. Phil laughs.

"Techno's just an old soul," he says. Something about the thought makes him think of their sparring session—the exhaustion he'd seen in his eyes, how he'd held himself with a grace beyond his years. His fingers tighten on his reins, and he can't help the small purse to his lips that comes from the thought. "It's nothing to be teased for," he says after a moment, and beside him, Ian hums.

"Maybe not," he says. "Despite it. You going to explain to me where we're going, now?"

"Right," Phil says. He glances ahead—he still can't see Techno. "Turnstones. We're looking for a man named Simon, who also goes by Hypixel—"

"We're looking for the Blood God?" Ian cuts in, sounding surprised.

"Not *the* Blood God," Phil corrects. "Just the man who's in charge of the people who still worship him."

"Is this because of the attacks on the coast?" Ian asks. "Are we going to kill him?"

"No," Phil says firmly. "According to Techno, the red cloaks are extremists. Simon and his people are harmless."

"According to Techno," Ian says. "When was the last time he saw them?"

Phil doesn't have an answer for that. He just shrugs.

"So we're going in blind," Ian says.

"Not blind," Phil corrects. "Just... the path is foggy."

“Now who needs glasses?” Ian grumbles, pulling his horse forward into the snow. “I’m going to catch up to Gramps. Come on.”

Turnstones is caught between two seas, a beacon lit against the foggy sky.

Not a lighthouse— not quite. The houses do not rise high enough in the sky to be lanterns like that, the streets too busy for a calm, warning presence. As they ride into the city, people barely glance their way, too caught up in their own lives to notice just three more travelers coming down from the north before it gets too cold. Phil knows the importance of Turnstones— the boundary between them and the Vaults, and more importantly, the boundary between the Empire and the dangerous forest that enshrouds the Vaults. The people here know its monsters and have suffered their attacks for centuries, never once defeated by them. The stone walls surrounding the city attest to that story, gouges and cracks and patched parts of stone and brick alike. The gate is heavy, fortified and thick as they pass through. The fog from the sea to the west is thick the day they ride in, obscuring most of their vision, and as the gate closes behind them Ian’s face is turned to it.

“Wonder what’s over there,” he says quietly as they ride through the bustle of people, just loud enough to be heard over it. “Past the monsters.”

“Nothing good,” Techno says grimly. Phil is suddenly reminded that this is the town he grew up in, supposedly— withstanding the monster attacks and trying to calm the angry waters to the west all the same. No one knows what’s beyond it; the giant sea creatures that swim within it keep any ships firmly at the bottom and all of their crew condemned to a watery death.

Emperors and kings alike had long since stopped trying to send voyages over.

“So,” Phil says. They’re all dressed plainly, not wearing banners or crests of any kind to keep their identity on the down-low. The only thing that might give them away is the fine quality of their steel. “Where to?”

Techno glances around. “It’s changed a lot,” he admits. “Bigger, now. But I think I can find him.”

“Go do your thing,” Phil tells him. “Meet us by the gate at sundown. We’ll find a place to sleep tonight.”

“Shouldn’t take me that long,” Techno says, dismounting his horse and handing the reins over to Phil. “Sounds good.”

They nod once to each other, and Ian follows Phil through the streets until they find an inn with enough stable room to hold all three of their horses. Once their horses are settled, they go off on foot, eyes peeled for Techno or anyone wearing a red cloak.

“You think they’re here?” Ian asks. Phil shrugs.

“Better be safe than sorry,” he says, patting the hilt of his sword. “But no, I don’t think they’re here.”

“Then we’re splitting up,” Ian says amicably, slapping Phil on the shoulder. “I’m going to go this way, and you’re going to go that way, and I’ll see you in a bit.”

“What?” Phil asks. “Wait, where—”

“To find something to drink!”

With that last call, Ian disappears. Phil is left bereft with one hand in the air and both a lost feeling and expression. He takes a moment to catch his breath and glance around, cataloging the things he sees. A mother walking down the cobbled street with her child clinging to her skirts and a basket on her hips; two young men in armor and wearing swords merrily making their way out of a tavern; a street vendor with a basket full of— oh, are those fresh oysters?

Later, when Phil’s pockets are emptier of coin and his belly more full of seafood, he makes his way farther down the street. Ian is long gone by far, although Phil supposes he could find him if he really wanted to. Duck his head into any of the bustling taverns and poke his nose about the breweries and he’d surely be in there. But he’s also just... enjoying his time alone. Phil doesn’t often get this kind of time, you see. Yes, yes, his job is very important and all, and he’s the most prominent figure in Empire politics, so expecting alone time is one thing. Wanting it? Wishing for it? That’s something separate entirely.

He’s always appreciated these quiet moments. Even in the center of an urban sprawl he can find them, tucked away like hidden secrets and well-worn, almost like a diary beneath wooden floorboards. A study of life as it moves and shapes around them. Sometimes he just sits and watches for the sake of watching people. His people.

Maybe it’s born out of love. That’s the most poetic way to put it. Phil loves his people, no matter how stupid or filthy or crass they might be. He can be all those things too, if he wanted. If the situation called for it, or if Prime decided it was his time. He’s at the mercy of the gods just like any other person on the Continent, at the end of the day.

It’s why this whole thing with the Blood God makes him uneasy. That god is older than any others he knows— Channel, Prime, all of it. Worship of the Blood God goes back centuries beyond written history, to a time when magic was more than just children’s stories and a highly regulated, dangerous class of dying academia. Back when magic was real. When the very air could taste like oranges and electricity, and mobs would attack villages with abandon.

Now, the only danger lies in the heart of the enchanted forest, and the seas surrounding the Vaults. As he walks, Phil keeps an eye on the fog crawling in from the west.

Busy watching the sky, Phil isn’t watching where he’s going. He realizes this as he nearly stumbles into another person— a young man, maybe around his age or younger— and their shoulders collide. He sidesteps, putting a foot or so of distance between them as they both right themselves, and Phil nods. The young man has darker skin, close-cropped hair, and tugs at the hem of his cloak as if to rearrange it.

“Sorry,” Phil says kindly, and the young man just looks at him. Then looks closer. Giving him the benefit of the doubt, Phil just smiles. “My fault.”

“S alright,” the guy says after another long moment of silence. He tugs again at the edge of his robe. It’s then that Phil notices the bruise on his face, sprawling purple and yellow and sickly green on his temple. It seems old– not fresh, and when the kid sees Phil looking at it, his face immediately shifts to something defensive. “Have a good day.”

“You too,” Phil says, watching him turn and flee. He doesn’t chase after– nor does he follow, although every part of him screams to do so. Curiosity killed the cat.

... Satisfaction brought it back.

Phil doesn’t follow. Not until he’s sure the young man isn’t looking over his shoulder for him, and only then does he meander along in the same direction. It’s not like he has anywhere to be. He’s not following him, even, he’s just... wandering behind. The young man doesn’t even notice him, too busy weaving through the streets of Turnstones until eventually, he turns down a side street and by the time Phil reaches the same point, he’s vanished.

For a moment he stands there, looking down the alley with a critical eye. No trace remains, however, and before long he abandons the venture. He’s sure it’s fine– he even pats his coin purse to make sure nothing has been stolen. Everything is in order.

Something about that bruise, though.

He can’t dwell on it for long. They’d arrived at Turnstones rather late in the day, and by the time he hurries toward the gate and their pre-arranged meeting place, the sun is dipping towards the horizon. Ian is, of course, nowhere in sight as time drags on.

Technoblade is. Phil spots him with ease, pink hair a splash of color in an otherwise dull crowd, especially with the late afternoon sun catching it at the right angle. Phil waits by the gate as Techno finds his way up to it, catching his eye and then glancing around.

“Bealio?” he asks, not a second after he arrives.

“Off getting drunk,” Phil says cheerily.

“I’m gonna kill him,” Techno says with a sigh, shoulders deflating a little. “He shouldn’t have left you alone.”

“Arguably I’m safer without him,” Phil points out. “He tends to start trouble.”

“Still,” Techno grumps. He crosses his arms. “If something happened–”

“Next time, take me *with* you, then,” Phil says, poking him in the shoulder. “Stop worrying about me. Did you find Hypixel? Anything?”

“I...” Techno’s face does something complicated. For the briefest of moments, Phil wonders if they’ve made a mistake coming here. But then it softens out, stretches into something more agreeable, and Phil rationalizes the risk is worth the cost. “Yes.”

“And?” Phil prompts.

“He wants to meet you,” Techno says.

“Alright,” Phil nods. “We can do that. When?”

“Soon. Said to meet for dinner and a show.” That complicated expression comes and goes again. “He also told me to tell you— well.”

“Told you to tell me what?” Phil prompts. Techno sucks in a hissy breath between his teeth, then lets it all out in one go.

“He told me to tell you that if he sees any guards, or if any of us come armed, he’s not gonna hesitate to make us the next sacrifices,” Techno says, with the most graceful air Phil thinks he can possibly muster. Techno’s usually pretty good at threats— he’s heard him throw worse ones at other soldiers in the plaza before, but this one feels different. “Said he doesn’t want the ghost of your... scum father hanging over our heads. Just you, me, and Bealio.”

Well.

“Alright,” Phil says. “If... if you’re sure.”

“Simon wouldn’t hurt us,” Techno says, and he does sound sure. As sure as Phil has ever heard him sound. “Or at least, not me. And I wouldn’t let him hurt you either. He can have Ian, though.”

“ *Techno.* ”

“I was *kiddin’* .”

“Did he say anything else? About the red cloaks?”

Techno grimaces. “Not really. Not to me. Says you’re gonna wanna hear it too, and he doesn’t wanna bother repeating himself.”

“Fair enough.” Phil sighs. “We’ll meet him for dinner. I think I know where Ian is, so we’ll grab him and head that way. Sound good?”

“Dinner *and* a show,” Techno says, almost pointedly.

“Sure,” Phil says, a bit slower, a little unsure. “Dinner and a show.”

They find Ian right where Phil thought he might be— two pints in at a tavern three feet from where they’d parted ways. He drags him out of the establishment and gives him a good shakedown to make sure he’s sober enough to come with.

“I’m fine!” he insists, hands raised and face red. “Seriously!”

“Tell me the truth,” Phil orders. “Are you good to be diplomatic right now?”

“I am *always* good to be diplomatic,” Ian says, wagging his eyebrows. Phil glances back at Techno (who raises an unimpressed brow), then back at Ian, and heaves a tired sigh. “I’m good!”

“You better not make me regret this,” Phil says, letting him go roughly and snorting as Ian stumbles forward. He turns, grinning back at Phil and pushes back his hair from his face, straightens out his jacket with a huff.

“I won’t,” Ian says with a wink. He strides forward and Phil watches him go, giving Techno a long-suffering look that is returned in kind.

They make their way down the streets, farther into Turnstones than Phil had gone before. Down into the bowels of the city, where their modest finery is soon noticeable simply because everyone else is dressed in rags. Phil feels out of place, because while military camps and soldiers’ dorms are familiar to him, this is not. This is something else entirely.

Techno, though.

Techno strides ahead like he doesn’t even notice the literal shit beneath his feet. He deftly steps over a stream of foul-smelling sewage and avoids filthy children running this way and that with ease. He towers over most of the crowd, having shot up in height substantially since Phil met him and still seems to be growing, and his pink hair turns more than a few heads their way. Phil ignores the whispers and keeps behind him in the shadow of his cloak, dragging Ian along as Techno leads them down, down, down.

Houses stack like building blocks, in shades of brown and gray. Clothing hangs from windows and shutters are pulled tight this time of year as the chill starts to come down from the north. The fog seems to grow thicker here— Phil turns his head to peer down a few side streets, and when he does, he can only see a few yards before everything peters out into a dull, gray nothing.

It swallows everything whole.

He sticks a little closer to Techno.

They go only a little bit farther before Techno comes to a stop. They’re in front of a two-story building, windows covered in blankets and one wooden door off-centered on the left. Beside the door is a faded paper, plastered to the bricks and peeling up slightly at the corner.

It is a bright square of red. It stands out among the rest of the buildings. When Phil reaches out to touch it, he finds it’s not paper at all, but a square of red fabric.

“It’s not dye,” Techno says after a moment. He’s looking at Phil, a strange expression on his face.

“What?” Phil asks. Techno nods at the square of fabric.

“It’s not dye,” he repeats. “Blood.”

Phil retracts his hand quickly, wiping his fingers down on his pants as he does. Techno cracks a wry smile and lifts his hand to the door. He knocks three times, waits and then knocks twice more.

“Wow,” Ian stage whispers. “They’ve even got a secret knock.”

“Shut up,” Techno says. They stand there for another minute, waiting, and Phil thinks for a moment that perhaps, nothing is going to happen.

Then the door swings open.

“Technoblade,” says the person behind it. They have dark hair, short and cropped close to their skull, and a scar down their left eye. They wear simple clothing, and glance from Techno to Phil to Ian and back again. “Simon mentioned you’d be by.”

“Plancke,” Techno says, ducking his head. “It’s good to see you.”

The person— Plancke, apparently— regards Techno for a minute. Then surges forward and wraps him up in a hug, Techno’s hands hovering over their back as they squeeze tight for a moment.

“It’s been too long,” worms its way out of the thick fur of Techno’s cloak. Plancke pulls back, hair now a little mussed, and smiles. The skin on their face stretches oddly from the scarring, but it’s a kind look. “I’ve missed you, little man. Look at you. Tall as a horse, now. And this— who—”

Their words trail off for a moment. They pull back, gripping Techno’s forearms as they do, inspecting his clothing. Then look at Phil and Ian again, clearly eyeing them with suspicion.

“Noblemen?” they ask, voice hushed. “Techno, what—”

“Let’s go inside,” Techno suggests.

They file in, ducking into a rather dark room, but at least it’s out of the cold and fog. There’s a hearth at the end of it, a ladder on the other, and hay scattered on the floor beneath the opening to the attic. There’s a table with multiple lit candles, a few papers, and an open inkwell and a quill.

“Excuse the mess,” Plancke says, moving to cap the ink and roll up the paper. The door shuts and Ian shakes out his shoulders behind Phil, a rustle of clothing. He’s on high alert— gaze sweeping the room twice more before looking once again at Plancke. He doesn’t think Techno has glanced away once. “So. Noblemen. What have you gotten yourself into, Blade?”

“I’m gonna tell you somethin’,” Techno says casually, leaning back some and glancing at Phil, “And you’re gonna have to get real cool about a few things really fast.”

“Oh?” An eyebrow is raised. Plancke braces their hands on the table. “Hit me.”

“This is His Majesty Philza Minecraft Watson, first of his name, Emperor of the North,” Techno says, cape sweeping wide as he gestures to introduce Phil. “And his advisor, Ian

Bealio.”

Plancke doesn’t move. Plancke doesn’t blink.

“Huh,” they say after a minute. “Well, you weren’t wrong.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Phil interjects. He thinks this might be the first time he’s spoken, and when he reaches a hand out, Plancke grips it almost on instinct. They shake firmly, and Phil nods once.

“And you, your, uh— Your Highness?”

“Phil is fine,” he says, ignoring the look on Plancke’s face. “I’m not royalty here. Not technically.”

“We’re undercover,” Ian supplies helpfully.

“What a day,” Plancke says, shaking Ian’s hand next. “Didn’t wake up this morning and think, oh, I’ll be hosting the emperor today.”

“I don’t think anyone wakes up thinking that,” Phil says, and Plancke laughs.

“Well, someone must,” they say. They turn their head, still smiling faintly. “So. Techno. Simon mentioned you were here, but didn’t say why. Just in town, or...?”

“No, actually,” Techno says. “We wanted to talk to you. Ah, or— Phil did.”

“Did he now?” Plancke asks, and when they turn their head to Phil again, there’s something distinctly more defensive in their gaze and posture. A spine settles. A hand rests closer to their waist, and the sheathed knife there. “What does the Emperor want with a peasant like me?”

Phil glances at Techno, then steps forward. He lifts his chin— puts on his regal, but kindest expression.

“Four days ago,” he says, “I received word from Helton. Gangs of red cloaks attacked families and killed nearly twenty— only one little girl survived. The rest were dead. Men, women, children. More than one babe. I hadn’t been born when my father worked to eradicate the followers of the Blood God, but I was raised on those stories.” As he speaks, Plancke’s expression falls, from angry to despondent.

“Ah,” they say. “So you’ve come to finish the job.”

“No,” Phil says. “I haven’t.”

“Has Technoblade told you anything about us?” Plancke asks. They push off the table, standing upright now. “Hypixel? Any of it?”

“A bit,” Phil says.

“A bit,” Plancke murmurs. “Did he tell you how we came to be? How he himself came here, to us?”

“...no,” Phil admits. Behind him, Techno shifts.

“Plancke—” he starts, but Plancke holds their hand up and cuts him off.

“You didn’t tell him?” they ask, sounding breathless and a little incredulous.

“I thought it was best to show,” Techno argues. A moment later, he adds, “I didn’t know how.”

“Best to show?” Plancke asks, then laughs. “Best to *show*. Of course you did. You know what— alright. Best to show it now, get it over with. Maybe His Majesty might understand then. What did Simon promise you?” he asks, and confusion wells up between Phil’s ribs, as warm as the hearth fire burning only a few feet away.

“Dinner and a... show,” Techno breathes. “Ah. Right.”

“Well, come on then,” Plancke says. They move, swishing past Phil and barely brushing his shoulders. They stop right in front of Ian, who stares at them, mildly confused. “Excuse me,” they say, and he steps aside after a second.

“Right, right— sorry mate.”

Plancke just smiles, and then leans down. All three of them watch as their fingers find some hidden latch, the wood rising up beneath them and from out of nowhere, a trapdoor rises from the floor. They pause, then look behind them and meet Phil’s eyes. Blue on blue— startlingly similar to his own.

“Well,” they say. “Come on, then.”

The tunnels are worse than the streets.

Filth from above drips down into them, seeping through the cracks in the stone and leaving every surface glistening, moist. Down here, there is no fog, but there is a darkness so total and complete that Phil thinks he could be swallowed by it.

The only thing that pushes it back is the torch Plancke holds. It lights their way, shining off the walls around them in glittering reflection and making the wet beneath their feet shimmer with gold. Their steps echo, and all he can hear is the sound of his own breathing and heartbeat in his ears as they walk.

He’s putting a lot of trust in Techno right now. He knows that— he also knows Ian knows that, based on the way his friend is sticking close and sticking fast, like an old piece of taffy to his shoe. It warms his heart a bit to know that Ian is worried about him. Worried about both of them, likely.

They are walking right into the viper's nest. Phil isn't stupid, even though he might look it right now.

They're only walking for a little bit before they come upon a door. Phil doesn't even spot it before Plancke is stopping and moving to open it, twisting the handle and pushing it inwards. Beyond it is more darkness, and a set of stairs upwards. They rise up, step by step, until another archway greets them.

Through it, light, and the sound of people.

Before they enter, Plancke turns to them. "This," they say, "is what remains of the Blood God."

And then they lead the way through the arch, and into chaos.

People bustle this way and that, up and down a hallway lit by lanterns and torches alike. Most of them are wearing some form of red— scarves, pants, shirts, bandanas. Plancke pushes past most of them, down another hallway and leaves their torch on a grate on the wall. Then through another doorway and into a room with a fighting pit in the center.

It's clear that's what it is. Even without the two men brawling in the middle of it, Phil would recognize the sand floor and steep walls for what they are. He's also aware of the way Techno's shoulders tighten and tense beside him.

"There are seats waiting for you," Plancke says, and Phil tears his eyes away from Techno's pinched face in order to painstakingly make their way over. The crowd is so loud in here that it's hard to hear over it, cheering every time one of the men in the pit lands a hit. It's almost feverish— the energy is wild, raucous, exciting. It makes him want to join in. To gamble on a life, to swing his own fist in the air with solidarity whenever a good punch is thrown.

It doesn't feel like a religion, until it suddenly does.

"'Til blood," Techno whispers, ducking his head down so Phil can hear him. In the ring, one of the men bleeds from his nose, thick and red.

"Yeah," Phil whispers back. "Blood."

They find their seats and sit— near the front of the ring, four of them in a row. Ian bundles Phil in to sit in the middle, between him and Techno, and Phil notices distinctly how they both side him in.

"What about Simon?" Phil asks, leaning over to look at both Techno and Plancke. They turn to him, and Techno blinks before raising a hand and pointing into the ring.

"Give him a moment," he says, and he sounds almost amused as Phil turns to look.

Simon Hypixel looks back at them, still bleeding from the nose, and grins.

Chapter End Notes

SORRY I DIDNT POST LAST WEEK I WS ENTERTAINING BEE BONESANDTHEBEES AT MY HOUSE SO had to make sure everything was perfect for the wife. you know how it is.

i also forgot on friday this week so. saturday upload it is. yknow how it is sometimes. finals hav ebeen nuts, but now i am officially graduated from college AND i got into grad school!!! 2023 is gonna be crazy..... but ill keep up with this story best i can :)

-

will update every friday!

if you're enjoying, be sure to subscribe to both the story and me on ao3 :) i post cool stuff and do cool things. also maybe follow me on [twitter](#) where you can come and say hi!!!! as well as a [tumblr](#)! ask me questions and shit i love to know what you're thinking!

or, consider joining the [discord](#)!

antecedent also now has a [playlist](#)!

cloaked red

Chapter Notes

btw i should let you guys know that any and all characters that show up that aren't phil, kristin or techno (ie pete, calvin, ian, tapl, simon) are basically gonna be ocs sharing the names of those people!!!! their personalities will be basically whatever i want them to be bc i 1. don't have a lot of source content to pull from and 2. need people to pad out the world :)

TW: blood and violence, graphic depictions of fighting

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He never thought he'd come back here.

It's strange, seeing the contour and shape of the stone walls he'd grown up running between. He knows every inch of this place, of these tunnels. It had been strange to see Plancke—stranger now to sit beside him, staring down into the pit he used to call his home and the sand his blood has graced more than a hundred times over as tribute.

Phil sits beside him now, tense and caught up in his own mind. Techno can't blame him. He is too, his thoughts a whirling mess of nostalgia and uncertainty. He's not sure if bringing Ian and Phil here was a mistake or not, but he's hoping for not. Plancke hasn't been outright hostile, and yet, he can feel eyes on them all as they wait for the match to be over and Simon to clamber out and come to them. It's mostly Techno's fault—his hair is a bright pink symbol of who he is. He's sure legends persist even now.

Technoblade. Once, that name would've struck fear and awe into the hearts of those who spoke it. The Blood God's chosen.

Now, he can feel eyes on his back like brands. *Traitor*, they whisper. The voices swirl in his ears, louder than ever. *Traitor, traitor, traitor. What have you become, warrior? Joining the enemy force? They're only using you.*

Shut up, he thinks back fiercely, and turns his attention back to the ring. Down below, Simon's familiar patch of brown hair looms, ever-violent.

He's a good fighter. Techno will always allow him that. Not as good as Techno, of course, because no one is. But he's good, and he was the first one to teach Techno to hold a sword, and the first one to look at him and say *yes, this one will do*.

He'll never forget Simon for that. Never forgive him, either.

The fight ends quickly now that they've arrived. The opponent is pummeled and Simon does a quick victory lap, shaking one bloodied fist at the crowd in tribute. Then he disappears for a few minutes— Techno can feel Phil's impatience growing, his unease setting in, but before long the crowd parts and through it all comes Simon.

He's got a shirt on now, and a red sash around his chest. His nose is still bleeding, although sluggishly, and it drips down onto his chest as he approaches. Techno moves to stand, and before anyone else can Simon lunges forward and wraps him in a hug.

What is *with* these people and their obsession with these things? Simon's arms are warm and he stains Techno's fur with the sacred wine of their people as he buries his head in Techno's shoulder.

"Kid," he says, voice breathy and fond. "You're home."

"I am," Techno says gruffly. Simon retreats a moment later, but keeps a hand on his arm as he does. "Weird to be back."

"The sand's missed you," Simon says, and Techno shakes his head.

"I don't have time for a brawl," he says, and a voice in the back of his mind drawls *regrettably*.

"I'd imagine," Simon says. He glances over Techno's shoulder, and his smile dims. "This must be your friend you mentioned to me."

Ah. Right. "Yeah," Techno says. "This is him. And our other friend. He's Ian."

"You whacked the shit outta that guy," Ian says, reaching out and shaking Simon's hand. Phil reaches out next, and the grip they share is firm.

"Thank you," Simon says. "Our god demands a bit of showmanship."

"Does he now?" Phil asks. He sounds amused— Techno looks over, and oddly enough, he's smiling. "That makes some things make sense."

"Hey," Techno says, defensive all of the sudden.

"I see he hasn't changed, then?" Simon asks Phil, and he shakes his head slowly.

"No," he says, and Techno shoves at his shoulder. "No, I don't believe he has."

"Hey!"

"It's good to know," Simon says cheerfully. Despite it, Techno can still see that layer of unease simmering underneath them all. Like a rocky shoreline hiding beneath whitecaps, with no lighthouse to warn them of when the seafloor might rise up and strike at the bottom of their ships. Simon tracks Phil's every move, and Phil does the same. They circle like two wounded wolves— eyes bright and heady with pain.

“So Techno filled you in,” Phil says, as they all sit once more. Another fight has begun– the movement draws Techno’s eye, drags him in. He forces himself to pay attention to the conversation anyway.

“He did,” Simon says. “Red cloaks on the coast. An old sect.”

“A murderous sect,” Phil says.

“The Blood God does not command murder,” Simon says evenly. “Murder might bring bloodshed, but all bloodshed does not necessarily bring murder.”

“Evidently,” Phil says, glancing down at the fight.

“Then you understand we had nothing to do with it,” Simon continues.

“I didn’t come here to accuse you,” Phil says, quickly, assuredly. “If I did that, I would’ve brought an army. It’s just me and these two at the moment– I just wanted information. Any you could give.”

“About the red cloaks?”

“Yes.”

“Well–” Simon pauses. Looks at Techno, then back at Phil. Techno is having a hard time paying attention again, drawn to the blood in the sand. “Why don’t we move somewhere quieter?”

Phil is looking at him too. He frowns.

“Yeah,” he says, “let’s.”

They move to get up, Plancke brushing past Techno with a look as they begin to move across the room. People part to let them get through, some jeering, others grinning. A moment later, Techno feels a hand on his arm. He turns– the touch is fleeting, and it’s Ian whose hand falls and meets his gaze. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small square kerchief, pressing it into Techno’s palm.

“For your nose,” he says.

As he says it, Techno suddenly feels it. The warm gush coming from his nostrils, dripping down to his lips. He tastes it– iron.

When he puts the kerchief to his face and lowers it again, it comes back red.

Simon’s office is down in the bowels of the pits, surrounded by violence, and surprisingly calm.

“So,” he says, sitting down in the chair behind the desk. Techno stays standing by the door—Plancke is with him, and the bloody kerchief is tucked away. “You want information.”

“As I said,” Phil nods.

It’s interesting to watch two diplomats at work. Like birds. Techno’s suddenly reminded of the time he saw two of the palace crows fighting in the plaza over scraps of stale bread, bickering and hopping back and forth as they tossed the breadcrumbs between them. It had been entertaining for all of two minutes, and then he’d gotten bored and lost interest. The game isn’t exactly his cup of tea.

But he’s in the middle of it, especially here. It’s just hard not to get distracted. Especially not with his chorus in the back of his head, which is rearing its ugly face now that he’s at the center of a place of worship. Simon keeps *looking* at him too, in those damned mockery of monks clothing, and all Techno wants to do is draw his steel.

“I heard rumors of recurrences,” Simon is saying. “But that’s all they were. Rumors. No one would willingly wear the red cloak, not after what your father did. We play it safe these days.”

“No one?” Phil asks. “Not one person you think of that was unhappy with how things were here?”

“I think you underestimate the effect the slaughter of the Blood God’s followers had on our practices,” Simon says. He leans forward—again, he’s looking at Techno. “Have you ever told him about it, Techno? How you came to me?”

“No.” He doesn’t want to. He doesn’t want a blight on their friendship, not like this.

“It’s not my story to tell,” Simon says, leaning back in his chair and spreading his hands wide. “However, I can tell my side of it if I wish. And I do. When your father came to town and demanded all of us dead, we fought. Of course we did—there is nothing our god likes better than a fight. But against the royal army? Against thousands of men? It was a slaughter. Our god loved it—until he realized we were dying at too quick a rate to replenish the worship. The Blood God recognizes gluttony as the evil it truly is. Some of us retreated. Some of us hid—some of us had families, people we loved. Some had children.”

Phil isn’t looking at him. Techno’s digging his fingernails into his palms so hard they’re bleeding.

“But your father came to their doors anyway,” Simon says softly. “And killed anyone above the age of ten.”

When he looks up next, Phil is staring at him. Eyebrows drawn together, face soft. He hasn’t shaved in a few days, and the stubble makes him look older than he really is. Techno knows that. He knows the pity in his eyes is real, and that makes it hurt a little worse.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asks. His voice is quiet, but not hurt. Just... gentle.

“What would’ve been the point?” Techno asks, raspy.

“Whenever Pete talked about it, when–”

“What would’ve been the point?” Techno reiterates. He’s angry, of all things, but bites down most of the bitterness. “I was a baby. So were you. Nothing we could’ve done mattered. And I trust you not to be like your father was. You being here just proves that to me.”

“Techno, I–”

“Leave it, Phil.” He levels his gaze, and Phil leans back, as if he wants to step away. A moment later, there’s a hand on his arm. When he flinches and turns, Plancke is staring at him. “What?”

“Techno,” Plancke says. “Would you like to go a few rounds in the pit?”

“What?” he says. “No. I should be here.”

“The God calls you,” Simon says, moving to stand. Techno looks over at him, and the way the blood drips from his nose is haunting. Except– except it had stopped bleeding, before. And it isn’t bleeding any longer. Shoot. “Go, Techno. His Majesty and I can talk politics. You can worship.”

“I don’t–” Even as he starts to say it, he knows it’s a lost cause. He wants to, is the thing. He aches for it, and Simon knows he does, and *Phil* knows he does, and everyone is stupid and hates him because his frustration and longing is probably clear as day on his face. He looks to and fro for a moment before throwing the bloody kerchief onto the floor, turning on his heel, and stalking out.

He knows these halls like the back of his hand, so it’s not hard to find his way down to the underbelly of the beast. Somewhere soft and vulnerable, where men and boys and women and girls tie their hair back and fists up and store the weapons and beat on hay-filled bags until their knuckles bleed through the wrappings. They stare at him as he walks by, eyes turning his way. It’s the armor, and the fine clothes. And the hair.

None of it matters, though. He strips himself down, no more armor, nothing but his tunic and pants. Hair goes up and back, and he takes some stained hand wrappings from a girl who offers them to him, eyes down and hands up.

Worship. Simon’s voice rings in his ears as he works on autopilot, feet finding their own way to a ring.

Voices scream for blood and gore. Both in his own mind, and in the air around him as he steps out onto the sand. He’s shed his shoes in favor of feeling the grains beneath his feet, cool and malleable. He shifts, getting a feel for his balance on it, and glances up to see his opponent.

It’s a woman. Maybe half his size, but he knows better than to underestimate her. Smaller ones usually move faster– he knows, because he used to be that small. Used to wait for

people to underestimate him.

To the marching tune of cheering screams, they fight.

He's been so caught up in his own mind lately. Coming down here, seeing Plancke and Simon, the red cloaks. He's felt like a leaf in a whirlpool, being dragged down into dark recesses. Swirling water, whiplash. But it all ends up in the same place.

Here, in a pit, with blood on his knuckles and screaming in his ears.

It feels good to win a fight. The girl goes down hard, laughing the whole time. So does the next opponent, and the next. By the time he beats opponent number three, the voices in his head have quieted. Now he only has to contend with the ones outside his own mind, the ones in the crowd.

With a glance upward, he raises a fist. The cheers are nearly deafening in their uproar, and when he clasps his fingers together and drops his hand, they go silent.

"Blood for the blood god," he says. The crowd repeats it— a choir of angels, singing the holy song of their people. Their voices rise and fall like a heartbeat, pounding, thrumming in his chest.

It feels good.

By the time he climbs out of the pit, still shaking with the adrenaline of it all, Simon is waiting for him. Behind him are Phil and Ian. Ian is looking at him with something like uncertainty, but Phil—

Phil is smiling.

"Good fight," he says, reaching out to clasp Techno's bruised hand in his own. Before he can pull away, Phil is inspecting it carefully.

"You saw?" he asks. His throat is raw and speaking is painful, croaking like a frog.

"Just the last one," Phil says. When he looks over, Ian smiles at him, nodding.

"You're fuckin' strong," he says, patting Techno's shoulder. Simon watches, smiling the whole time, and when Techno turns to him, reaches out and wipes something— be it sweat or blood— away from his forehead.

"We miss you here," he says. Something in his eyes is faintly nostalgic, a little protective. ... He hadn't been a father to Techno, but he'd been the closest thing to it. Independence was always more his style, and learning through his own mistakes was the preferred course of action. Simon had respected that. Encouraged it, even if it meant letting a kid into the ring. "How much do I have to pay you to stay?"

"I don't think you could," Techno admits. Simon's face shifts, and he presses his hand against Techno's forehead again, frowning.

“Has it gotten bad?” he asks, barely a whisper.

“Yes,” Techno admits.

“Our god has been restless for me, as well,” Simon tells him. “I wouldn’t be surprised if the red cloaks are asking for too much, too quickly. I told the emperor all I could to help, and he promised not to let any harm come to us in turn. He’s a good one. You chose well.”

Simon’s hand traces down from his forehead, to his cheek. Techno tips his chin up. “I didn’t choose him,” he says. “He found me.”

“Same thing,” Simon says, and then lets go of him. Techno wonders if the blood is smeared down his face. Based on the way Ian is looking at him— yeah, it is. “Travel safe. Live well. Deal with the ones who disgrace our family’s name.”

“I will.” He means it, too. If Simon is right, then they’re the reasons he’s been hearing the voices so often lately. Usually they’re manageable to non-existent— but with them so present lately, it’s been hard. If taking out the red cloaks means he can act normal again, then he’ll fucking do it.

Blood for the blood god, they whisper in his ear as Simon gives him a stiff, but warm hug.

While he doesn’t agree with them often, this time, he thinks they might be right.

Plancke leads them out of Hypixel’s tunnels with ease, shoulders light and posture steady. Techno brings up the rear, cloak and armor piled over his arm as he struggles to put everything back on as they walk. Eventually he gives up, just strapping on his cloak and the main armor pieces and leaving the rest to carry. Phil watches him in amusement, but there’s something else there too— curiosity. Techno knows the minute they’re alone he’s going to have questions, and braces himself for it.

Once in Plancke’s house, it’s a simple goodbye. No more hugs, thank fucking god, but they do smile warmly at Techno as the three in their party file out the door and back into the misty night. Darkness has long since fallen by now, and the moon and stars are hidden by the thick fog that seems to envelop the city. Techno leads the way back to the inn Phil tells him he rented, the street lanterns like glowing yellow bobbers in a sea of gloom. The very air is thick and heavy.

“So,” Phil says as they walk, him on one side, Ian on the other. Techno has his sword strapped to his waist again and is keeping a firm hand on the hilt, and keen eyes watching around them. “That was interesting.”

“What did he tell you?” Techno asks, and Phil raises a brow at him.

“Not what I meant, mate,” he says. “Hello. Technoblade. You were raised in a cult?”

“It’s not a—” Techno almost starts the familiar defense, but then sags a bit. No point in denying stuff now that Phil’s seen it firsthand. “Well. Yeah, okay. I guess.”

“They were intense,” Ian says, swinging his hands from side to side. “Pummeling the *shit* out of each other. Is it always like that?”

“As far as I can remember?” Techno asks. “Yeah. But only on certain nights. Most of the time it’s just... a community. Hidden and secret and quiet, but those people all have lives. Houses. Families.”

Phil is quiet. Ian, however, is not.

“So, what?” he asks. “Is Simon your da—”

“No.”

“Yeah, but he—”

“My parents were killed by the first crusade against us,” Techno says evenly, keeping his eyes on the road ahead of them. “By Empire soldiers. Simon took me in as a baby and raised me after that.”

He’d expected Phil to stay quiet. That doesn’t happen. “When did you start fighting?” he asks, and Techno’s next step almost falters.

“I was eight,” he says.

“Prime,” Ian mutters.

“I mean, I learned how to hold a sword younger than that,” Phil reasons. Techno raises a brow and glances over at him.

“Did it look like we were usin’ swords down there?” he asks, and Phil pauses. Opens his mouth, then closes it again.

“Ah, well. No.”

“Yeah. You don’t get weapons ‘til you’re older, and even then,” Techno says. When he looks down, the bruises have darkened on his hands, blossoming into petals of dark red and purple. Time and experience means he knows it won’t be long for them to scab over and turn a sickly yellow-green, before disappearing entirely. “Hands are preferred. Our god likes bruises.”

“Seems barbaric,” Ian says, and Techno scowls.

“We— they *choose* to do it,” he says. “No one who doesn’t want to fight is forced to. No one is forced to do anything. And we don’t kill mindlessly.” He steadies himself again, clenching his fist in and out just to feel the dull throb of pain. “Which is why the red cloaks are wrong, and deserve to be punished for it.”

Phil stops, then. Dead stop in the middle of the street, and Techno skids to a halt as well. It takes Ian a moment, but when he does notice he just stands there, staring as Techno turns and looks back at Phil, utterly baffled. Phil is watching him with two narrowed eyes, and an unreadable look.

“Do you trust me?” he asks, and Techno—

Techno isn’t sure.

He feels flayed. As though every part of him is on display right now for Phil to see, bare and exhausted. His family, his former friends, his home— Turnstones is the background to their unfortunate stage play, a foggy, distant scenery to the tragedy of their lives. Techno inhales, and the hesitation is enough, because something on Phil’s face breaks a little bit.

“I don’t want to hurt them,” Phil says, softly enough that his voice doesn’t carry beyond them three. Ian makes a noise, but doesn’t move to come between them. “None of them. They’re not hurting anybody— nobody but themselves, at least. And I wouldn’t... I *wouldn’t* hurt them. I’m not my father. I don’t *want* to be my father. I don’t want my reign to be marred with bloodshed and pain, the plight of suffering people. I want to make the world a better place than how I found it, and I can’t— I can’t make those choices alone. Which is why I wanted you.” His eyes flick over Techno’s shoulder. “Both of you. I trust your judgments. I know you have the common people in mind, and I need that. I need you so I don’t make the same mistakes he made. I’m—”

Phil, suddenly, is kneeling. Cold stones that must hurt on his knees, and Techno, startled, reels backwards.

“I’m sorry,” Phil says, ducking his head. “For the actions of my family that took yours from you. Forgive me. Please.”

Techno stares at him. He can’t— He doesn’t—

“Phil,” he says. “I’ve already forgiven you. You didn’t have to be forgiven. You— no. This is dumb. *You* are dumb. Get up.”

“Calling your emperor dumb?” Phil asks, cracking a grin as he looks up at Techno. Techno flails, all at once trying to reach for him to pull him upwards and not sure what else to do with his hands right now.

“I wouldn’t have to if you weren’t being dumb!” Techno points out, a little frantic. “Please, just get up!”

Ian has started laughing behind them, and pushes past Techno to drag Phil to his feet in one go. They stagger forward together and Techno nearly has to catch them, hands out and chest vibrating so hard it’s like someone’s playing a harmonica in there. He scowls at them both as Phil grins at him and Ian laughs, muttering something under his breath about both of them being dumb, and Techno reaches out to whack Phil on the forehead.

“I don’t have to forgive you,” he says. “You’ve done nothing wrong. You’re my—” He swallows. “You’re my best friend.” He’s glad Phil saw this part of his life, however brutal or sad it might seem. Honesty coming from him is like pulling teeth, but he says, “I’m glad I know you. I wouldn’t choose anywhere else to be.”

“You sound like you’re reading a script,” Ian says. “Would it kill you to be genuine?”

“That is Techno being genuine,” Phil points out, and he scowls deeper as the two of them devolve into laughter, rolling his eyes.

“You’re both dumb,” he says, turning on his heel. “I changed my mind. I’m going home without you.”

“Wait, no—”

Laughter peals behind him as Techno stalks forward a couple steps, only to come to a sudden halt. Behind him, Phil’s— or Ian’s, he’s not sure— hand grabs at his cloak, trying to stabilize them both, clearly having a moment as they stand there. Techno narrows his eyes as the hair on the back of his neck rises imperceptibly.

“Excuse me.”

He glances to the left, and there; he knew they were being watched. Something in the air, that brief moment of eyes on him. In a side street is a figure, clouded in the fog and half-hidden, but Techno’s mind twinges with recognition. Behind him, the hand on his cloak tenses, then disappears.

“Yes?” Phil asks, voice suddenly sharp and aware. After a second, the figure steps further out of the fog and into view— their hood is pushed back, revealing close-cropped hair and a dark complexion.

“Technoblade,” the man says. Techno blinks.

“That’s me,” he confirms. A second later, he catches sight of a small red piece of fabric pinned to the man’s cloak. “Ah.”

“Simon sent me,” the man says. “My name is Calvin. I’m a divine host, like you.”

“Divine host?” Ian whispers, *far* too loudly.

“It’s what we call those who worship the God in the pits,” Calvin says, tone laced with amusement as he looks over Techno’s shoulder and clearly looks at Ian. “I am one of the honored ones.”

“I think I know you,” Techno says, because, well. He thinks he does. His face is older and a little more scarred, but he looks vaguely familiar in the way old childhood friends do. Calvin smiles at him, and yes. There. He knows that look.

“We fought once or twice,” he says, holding his hand out. Techno gives it a firm shake, and nods.

“That’s right,” he says. “And then you... left.”

“Temporarily,” Calvin says. “When I came back, *you* were gone. Imagine, the legendary Technoblade disappearing overnight. The rumors were interesting, at least.”

“Gossipers,” Techno says. “Simon sent you?”

“He said you might need me,” Calvin says. “Someone who knows the God inside and out.”

“I think I can manage it,” Techno says warily.

“I can also fight,” Calvin says. A beat passes, and he continues: “And I have no qualms with killing blasphemers. Consider me a token of good faith from Hypixel, and a symbol of our support of the Empire.”

Techno glances over his shoulder. Phil is smiling, a small, wry thing.

“Quite the diplomat,” he says. Techno snorts, then looks back at Calvin, whose eyes are suddenly a little wider and more worried than before. Phil moves to step past Techno and he lets him, but makes sure to hover around his shoulder. Just in case. “Do you?”

“Do I... what?” Calvin asks after a pregnant beat.

“Do you support the Empire?” Phil asks, tipping his head slightly. “It’s a reasonable enough question, I think. I’m aware of what the crown has done to followers of the Blood God. I know for a fact you’re more than aware. So. Do you still support the Empire?”

Calvin’s gaze flicks from Phil to Techno and then back again. Techno sets his jaw and waits. He’s made his choice— given his answer, pledged his loyalty. But that doesn’t mean Calvin has to, or even Simon. He hasn’t seen Simon in years. Things could’ve changed. Everything earlier could’ve been a bluff, leading them to slaughter like lambs. And yet... Techno doesn’t think so.

“I will admit,” Calvin says after a second, cutting through his internal panic, “that I’ve been following you for a hot minute. Which is why I can say yes.” He nods once, firmly. “I do support you as Emperor. It’s rare you find a man in power willing to apologize and bend the knee to someone that was hurt because of the actions of his father.”

“I would hope it isn’t so rare,” Phil says, and Calvin barks out a laugh.

“You’d be surprised,” he says. For a moment they’re all silent, and then Calvin slaps a hand over his chest with a muffled thump. “Your Majesty. I am in your service.”

Phil is silent for a moment, then turns and raises a brow at Techno. He shrugs— he has no qualms with it, and when he looks at Calvin, he thinks he could probably beat him in a fight. He simply won’t leave the man alone in a room with Phil or Ian until he’s proved himself, although, if the hard set to his eyes and quiet quirk of determination to his lips is anything to go by, that won’t take long.

“I have no arguments,” he says, making sure his voice is almost dull, bored. Better to let Calvin think he has no suspicions. “He’s kind of a suck up, though, don’t you think?”

Behind them all, Ian cackles.

“Hm,” Phil says, turning back to Calvin and giving him a very obvious once-over. “He is. But that’s alright, we need more of those around here. You two are only so tolerable.”

And with that, he begins walking again, brushing right past Calvin, who is standing there as though someone has pantsed him in the middle of a crowded hallway. Techno waits for Ian to hurry up and join Phil before moving himself, clapping Calvin on the shoulder to startle him back into life. Shocked stone statues can't fight, after all.

"I—" Calvin says, cheeks red in the dim lantern light.

"You'll get used to it," he says, dragging him forward and watching Phil prance along ahead with quiet amusement.

By the time they reach the inn Phil had apparently set up for them that night, it is late. The fog is lower than ever, and even Techno's eyes are drooping, exhaustion forcing to overtake him as they walk. Calvin has been mostly quiet the walk back, but in his defense, they all have been. The joking tone seems to have dissipated into the quiet night, and as the lanterns glow with soft, effervescent halos of sodium orange in the background, they file into the inn.

Only for Phil to stop abruptly halfway to the stairs.

"What?" Ian asks, sounding a bit miserable. Techno reckons the ale's worn off. But a moment later, his voice rises in pitch and sharpens, snapping to attention. "Oh shit, is that—"

"Your Majesty," someone says, and Techno blinks to find a messenger bowing lowly, kharvaa covering their face and eyes narrow. Underneath them are dark, deep bags, and their clothing is ragged, as though they ran the whole journey and did not stop.

"Pete found us, then?" Phil asks lightly, leaning in. Techno's hand, unbidden, goes for his sword hilt. Calvin is two steps behind him, watching with interest as the messenger whispers in Phil's ear. His face does something complicated— concern, upset, Techno's not quite sure.

Whatever it is, though, it's not good news.

"Thank you," Phil says to them, leaning away. He reaches out to clasp one of their hands in his, holding it tightly. Based on the confusion the messenger's eyes hold, that's not exactly normal protocol. Techno knows it's not. He's used these messengers before, and they're specifically trained since a young age to be professional, light on their feet, and wickedly quick. "Do not worry about the return journey, or a message back. You won't reach him any quicker than we will. Upstairs, there's a room already paid for and breakfast in the morning. Go back to the capital after that." He squeezes their hand once, then lets go, and with a confused but appreciative nod, the messenger disappears up the stairs. Phil turns to all of them, and it's as though he's aged fifty years in a day.

"Last night," he says, hushed. "More attacks. More dead. Some people survived, but it was a bloodbath in Helton. Pete wants us there, now. We cross the lake, we can get there in a day."

"No boats will be running this time of night," Ian points out, gesturing to the empty inn save for one or two late-night patrons and a tired barkeeper.

"They will if I pay them enough money," Phil says, waving a hand. "Let's get our horses and go, come on."

In a rush, they grab their rides from the stables, Calvin slinging himself up behind Ian and rolling his eyes when a rowdy whistle cuts through the air. Techno cuts Phil off before he can take off down the streets, his own steed jostling underneath him as he does so.

“Hey,” he says quietly, trying not to be worried about the crease in Phil’s brow and the way his eyes dart side to side. “Was Pete angry?”

“Angry?” Phil questions.

“About you coming here.”

“No idea,” Phil says, urging his horse onward. Techno moves to let him out, and both of them start to pick up speed and follow Ian and Calvin down towards the docks. Around them, the fog whirls and scatters with the rush of wind from their billowing cloaks. “I don’t care if he is. He can be angry. There’s nothing he can do about it anyway— I’m in charge,” he says, and then takes off at a gallop down the cobbles. Techno inhales, then hurries to follow.

Turns out, Phil is right. With enough money, you can do anything. The boat they hire is small but quick as the captain assures them, and he is honored to be hosting the Emperor himself. *Very* honored. There was a lot of uncomfortable bowing and groveling. Techno’s not sure how Phil manages to bear it with a smile and a graceful nod of his head— it’s times like these he’s glad he’s intimidatin’, because then he can just stand in the back with a hand on his sword hilt and glare at anyone who gets a little too close to Phil or Ian. Calvin sticks by him mostly as they prepare, and even as their boat sails away from the docks and fog of Turnstones.

He stays on the top deck, unsure about the creaking ship below his feet. He’d only been on a ship once or twice before this. Twice, actually. Once, when he was very, very small. He can’t really remember the details, except for the fact he’d been crying most of the trip. The second one had been when he’d left Hypixel on Simon’s dime, sailing this very path upon the great lake and watching the lantern lit shores disappear into nothing.

“It’s strange,” Calvin says as they stand there, the fog encompassing them whole. “How it only comes at night.”

“Heh?”

“The fog,” Calvin clarifies. “As long as I’ve lived here, I’ve only ever seen it at night. By morning, it’s gone.”

“That’s Narcissus’ Waters for you,” Techno grumbles, turning away from the shore and glancing back. Phil is up by the wheel, talking to the captain again. Ian leans on the opposite railing, also watching Phil. Beside him, Calvin shuffles his feet.

“Is he a good man?” he asks, and Techno knows he’s asking about Phil.

“I think so,” he says. At night, it’s hard to see Phil’s expression from down here. “I think he tries.”

“You seem loyal to him.”

“I am. I saved him, and he saved me.”

“From what?”

“None of your business.” It comes out sharper than he meant it to, but that’s probably for the best. Calvin, at least, has the decency to look abashed. “Just help us with the red cloaks, and you can go back to Hypixel. I know being away is painful.”

“You’re telling me,” Calvin says with a huff. “Can’t imagine how you do it, what with the God in your head and everything.”

“They’re not in my head,” Techno says, rolling his eyes. Very distantly, as though he’s hearing it through the fog, he can make out some booing. “And even if they were, that’d be lame. *So* lame. The *lamest*.” The booing gets a teensy bit louder.

“Right,” Calvin says good-naturedly. Techno goes to glare at him, but the jerk isn’t even payin’ attention anymore. He’s looking at Ian now. “And who’s he?”

“Ian Bealio,” Techno says. “King’s unofficial right hand, although give him another year and it’ll be official. They’ve been friends since birth. He’s an idiot.”

“Smart, though?” Calvin asks, and Techno has to at least nod gruffly. “Pete. Phil mentioned someone named Pete.”

“Pete’s a lord,” Techno says. “On the Emperor’s council. Major player. He’ll be meeting us in Helton, I assume, along with reinforcements. Our job is to figure out where the red cloaks are hiding and take them down.”

“They won’t be hiding, though,” Calvin says softly, and Techno looks over at him. “It’ll be in plain sight, won’t it?” he asks, glancing back. His eyes are dark pools of steel. “Like we do at Hypixel.”

“They wouldn’t put up red posters,” Techno says, and Calvin shakes his head.

“No, they wouldn’t,” he says. “They’d be completely normal people until night comes and they start their sacrifices. Hiding, sure, but in plain sight. We won’t be able to find them—”

“Unless they’re attacking,” Techno says grimly, setting his jaw. “People are going to have to die.”

“Yes,” Calvin says. “Unfortunately.”

Somewhere in the back of his mind is a civil war of gruesome disappointment and delighted relief. Techno shoves it all away, locks it in an imaginary dungeon, and throws the imaginary

key into the wine dark waters of the great lake they're crossing. He knows he's scowling like an asshole, but he also doesn't particularly care.

"Phil's gonna hate it," he says, mostly to himself. Beside him, Calvin hums.

"That's the price of our god," he says lightly, and Techno hates it. Hates that he's right.

He grips his sword a little tighter, and watches the water beneath.

"Your Grace," Pete says, smile wide and pissed off on his face. "What a pleasure to see you."

"I missed your sarcasm, Pete," Phil says lightly, tossing his gloves onto the table and moving to sit in the chair at the head of it. Techno follows, motioning with one hand for Calvin to stay by the door, and stands just behind and to the right of Phil's chair. "And it's only been a few days."

"Yes, well." Pete's face could probably light the hearth in the room with fury and fire alone. "It was so unexpected."

"I had some things to look into," Phil says, leaning forward and dragging his fingers across the map that's laid out. "Helpful things." Techno follows his gaze, eyeing each red-slashed point on the map with a mixture of distaste and sorrow. He knows what they stand for.

They'd arrived in Helton early—the wind had been in their favor, and they'd arrived at sundown, just as the nighttime bells were ringing. Helton is a port city through and through; he's been here once before, the same trip when he'd left Hypixel, and the crowds and smell of salt and fish don't make him any less uneasy than the last time he'd been here. Now too, above it all rises the stench of fear.

People huddled in corners, whispering. The streets are crowded, but significantly less so. And as night fell, they cleared entirely. According to Pete, as they met him on the docks, he'd installed a curfew. Techno doesn't blame him, but the red cloaks apparently hadn't quit.

"And what did those helpful things tell you?" Pete asks, pointedly looking between Calvin and Techno.

"You can be mad at me later, Pete," Phil says sharply. "When this is all over and done with. For now, I want to rip this out at the root. The attacks are clustered on the northwestern side of town, are they not?"

"Yes, Your Grace," one of the armored men in the room says. He steps forward some, nodding at Phil, who nods in turn. "While they are widespread, the majority of the attacks have been near the western harbourfront. Locals call those streets the Limpway."

“On account of all the one-legged beggars,” Ian says dryly. Phil shoots him a look, then tips his head back down to the table.

“There have been some attacks in wealthier neighborhoods, though,” he says, gesturing. Techno leans in—there are only a few, maybe ten out of fifty or sixty red marks clustered in another area of the map. “By the river?”

“Merchant homes,” the guardsman says.

“Were any of those families connected?” Phil asks, glancing up. “Business, politically, personally?”

“Just lived right next to the river,” the guardsman says.

“Alright,” Phil says, leaning back in his chair. Techno tips his head.

“Could they be using boats?” he asks. “If it’s right on the river.”

“They could, but the area is so heavily trafficked, and no one saw anything,” Pete mentions. “It’s not hard to hide a red cloak, though. Could have put it on after.”

“Have every ship in the eastern harbor searched,” Phil says, leaning one elbow on the table and eyeing the map. “And the western, too.”

“Already halfway done doing that,” the guardsman says with a nod.

“Send a messenger to the Isles, as well,” Phil says. “Inform the king of the events happening here. We’re close enough to the border that it may be an issue, Logstead is only an hour ride away. Not to mention that most of the boats in this port are coming from or going to the Isles. Better to warn him of it now than surprise him later on. Post men at every street corner. I want this finished *tonight*. ”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

With a rush of armor and pattering feet, the town guard files out of the room. There’s quiet for a moment after they’re gone, then Phil turns to look over his shoulder at Techno. He raises a brow.

“Well?” he asks, gesturing. “What do you think?”

Techno glances up at Calvin and gestures for him to come forward. With hesitant steps he does, peering over the map. Techno stares down at it, and ponders his next words very carefully.

“The red cloaks’ ultimate goal is sacrifice,” Techno says, not taking his eyes away from the board. “They spill blood for the Blood God. They think their work for the God will get them blessed and their souls a spot in his eternal coliseum. They know you’re after them. They won’t be parading around in daylight as cultists— they will be regular people, hiding in plain sight.” He can feel Calvin watching him from the other side of the table, and inhales.

“There’s not going to be a way to catch them by pattern. There is no pattern. They choose

what feels right. Houses, families, *people* that feel right. The only way to catch them is to catch them in the act.”

“No,” Phil says immediately.

“There is no other option,” Techno says, turning to him. “Unless you want to turn this city upside down searching for them. We have to lie low until they attack, which could be tonight, and surprise them. You said you wanted to pull this out by the root, Phil. I’m handing you the garden shears. This is my council.”

“It’s not as though we can trust it,” Pete scoffs, and Techno whirls, hair flipping out to the side.

“No?” he asks. “No, why not?”

“I think you know why,” he says, and Techno all but sees red. “Your Grace, no disrespect meant, but you brought two of them into our midst. I do believe Technoblade means well, but it is hard to…” He trails off, then waggles a hand in the air. “Fix certain temperaments.”

“I’ll kick your ass,” Techno says, just about ready to climb over the table and enact unspeakable violence. His sword sings with it.

“Techno—” Phil says, rising from his chair.

Techno ignores him. “I have been nothing but loyal,” he hisses, leaning so far over the table he’s in Pete’s stupid, old face. “I have given my council as Phil has asked me to, I left my life for this and for him, and I have served and served well. There is no reason for you to distrust me except for the clinging tendrils of an old grudge you hold against my people, the people who raised me and loved me and cared for me, and you say they’re *evil*. Evil. You know what’s evil? Rippin’ babies from their mothers arms and slicin’ their throats. Kicking in the doors of families and tearing them apart when they’d done nothing but worship a different god than y’all. If anything, I should be the one questionin’ *you*, ” Techno hisses, poking a finger out into Pete’s chestplate. “You wanna talk temperaments? Get yours checked, old man. You’re not in charge.”

“And neither are you,” Pete says firmly. “So back away from me and watch your mouth.”

“I’ll watch my mouth when you start respecting me for the things I have done, and not shittalkin’ me to my face about my imagined faults,” Techno spits.

“Oh-kay,” Ian cuts in, throwing an arm between Techno and Pete. “You two need a freaking time out. Techno, step back. Pete, get out of here.”

“I’m not moving,” Pete says.

“This is an issue we resolve now,” Techno says. His veins feel like they’ve been flooded with ice, a river of fire down his spine and a whole bunch of rattling marbles in his veins. He’s always hated the way anger feels. It itches under his skin. A suggestion to a violence, but without the satisfaction that comes from enacting it. He *hates* being angry, but the way Pete

looks at him makes him want to rip the map from the table and scatter the small chess pieces to the floorboards.

“No, it’s not,” Ian snaps. “Techno, takes a few deep breaths. You look like a fucking tomato. Pete, learn when to shut the hell up and maybe do some soul-searching around your biases.”

“I am just concerned for the Empire,” Pete says, a hand splayed flat on the table. Techno resists the urge to throw his hands in the air.

“So am I!” he says. “Channel, what do you not *understand* about that?”

“Er,” Calvin says. “Uh. Sorry. If I may?”

Techno looks over– the kid is staring between the two of them with wide eyes, clearly a hundred leagues out of his depth. Pete just shrugs and buries his head in one hand, so Techno gives him a short nod as he tries to get his breathing under control and the voices back at a manageable level. They’re screaming for blood– it’s a little disconcerting. In fact, they’re not... usually like this. He frowns, harder than he was before, and lifts a hand to his head to try and relax.

“The red cloaks are going to be hidden, like us,” Calvin says. “And you were right, uh, my lord. Cloaks can be easy to hide. But not *that* easy. If we wait until another attack starts, we can get most of them, if not all. It is genuinely the best way.”

Phil, who at some point had sat back down while Techno and Pete were arguing, isn’t looking at any of them. He’s looking, instead, out the one window in the room. It’s dark out– Techno had noticed it when they’d arrived, but put its existence in the back of his mind. The glass warps and distorts the world outside, turning it into a mockery of existence, but through it Techno can see flickering light.

“People will die,” Phil says, and he sounds miserable.

“People will always die,” Calvin says. “That is the way of things.”

“I hate it,” Phil says. He opens his mouth to say something, and then stops.

“As do we all, Your Grace,” Pete says. He goes to continue, but Techno isn’t listening. He’s watching Phil, who is still looking out the window, slowly sitting up straighter and straighter. Techno frowns, taking a step over as Phil sits entirely upright, brow furrowed. There is a sinking feeling in his stomach, and when he looks out the window, at first he doesn’t understand. The gold-red lantern light from outside flickers in the glass pane, twisted into unnatural shapes– and then he realizes.

“Fire,” Phil says softly. The room goes still. Phil turns his head and says louder: “There’s a fire.”

Outside, distantly, smoke starts to billow into the air.

“A distraction,” Calvin says, and Techno nods. In one step, he’s back at the table. “Where is it?”

“Here,” Phil says after a moment of deliberation. “Or, abouts.”

“South side of the Limpway,” Pete says.

“So our forces need to be in the north,” Techno says. A second later, someone bursts into the room, and outside there are sounds of shouting men. It’s the guardsman from earlier, and he stares at them all with wide eyes.

“Attacks,” he breathes. “A fire in the south, and attacks in the—”

“North?” Calvin asks. He nods, tight-lipped.

Techno starts to say something, then pauses. Turns to Phil. For a moment, no one speaks. Phil looks at the map of the city, and with one finger, traces the slashed red line marring its surface.

“Let’s go,” he says.

The streets are dark and empty, which means the screaming echoes far.

They hear it before they see anything, hoofbeats clattering down the cobblestones and mingling with the high-pitched voices of terror. Techno’s heart is racing, matching pace to the speed of his horse as they fly down the streets and taste salt on the wind.

“To the left!” he shouts as they approach the Limpway, signaling to a company of guardsmen behind him. He hurriedly tries to recall the map. “And to the right! Cut them off on each side and bottleneck them away from the harbor!”

He barely hears the shouts of compliance as they continue onwards, some of their ranks pulling away and disappearing into the night. Phil casts him a pale-faced but grateful look as they turn into the Limpway proper, and Techno turns his attention back to the chaos at hand. Shutters are pulled tight, streams of murky water trickling down the sides of the narrow street and they splash through them. The lanterns are lit, casting yellow-orange circles of light around them as the screaming gets louder. Around them, shutters pull tighter.

“This way,” Pete calls, and they head further down. The screaming reaches a crescendo then, and finally they see the carnage.

A whole section of houses, stacked on top of each other like clumsily-placed building blocks, some of them leaning so far to either side Techno fears they might fall. A few are more than one story tall, and their doors are open.

Beneath the hooves of their horses, the water turns red.

Without a word, Techno slips off. He can hear the thunk of armor and footsteps as Calvin does the same behind him and Phil farther to the left— he heads right for one of the houses, the door already kicked in and splintered as it hangs on its hinges. There is a terrifying lack

of screaming in this house, but he doesn't let the chill that shudders down his spine stop him as he barges inwards.

Inside is a scene of carnage. Furniture is tipped over, blood smearing the far wall. A lantern is lying on the floor, the flame inside flickering, and Techno reaches down to right it. As he does, he gets a look under the table— and sees a pair of feet, an ever-growing pool of blood.

Glancing behind him, he finds Calvin. He lifts a finger to his lips and creeps further inwards, ignoring the body on the floor in order to continue on. He finds another body, a man this time, facedown in the second room. He steps over this one as well— there is no saving him, he knows it.

The third room is where he finds the red cloak.

Three children, huddled against the far wall. A girl no older than fourteen, shielding a gaggle of them with her own body as a man in a red cloak descends with a dagger.

He doesn't get to finish the job. Techno lops off his head without so much as an ounce of regret. The sound it makes rolling on the floorboards, the way the blood spills from his neck and his body slumps over— it's good. He kicks the man away from the children as one of the little ones screams, and the oldest girl is sobbing.

"It's alright," he grunts, unsure of what else to say to them. "Hey, now."

When they don't stop crying, Techno turns back to Calvin. He looks just as lost and angry as Techno feels, and he shrugs when Techno gestures to the group of them.

"Here," he says, moving to brush past. "You stay here with them and guard them, then. I'm going to kill more blasphemers."

"Let me know if you need any help," Calvin says, and Techno just grins, grim.

The violence that follows is like a fight between beasts.

And here's the thing— Techno doesn't like words like that. Primal, animalistic. Just because he enjoys the satisfaction of pleasing the instinctual, hindbrain part of him doesn't mean his actions aren't calculated. Every second of violence is specifically thought out, in fact, to *produce* that reaction. He's not an animal. Far from it. They don't have the foresight he does, and in that, they lack the finely-tuned, delectable joy surrounding control that humanity begets.

He fights like he means it, because he does. Because the red cloaks have caused carnage and sullied the name of his God, and killed *his* people in order to do it. Phil's people, yes, but they are Techno's now, too. And he will do anything to keep them safe.

He strikes them down one by one, systematically checking each house and catching them by the scruffs of their necks. He finds Phil again, just to make sure he's safe, and together they blaze a trail of righteous justice in the wreckage of the Limpway. The smoke is thick in the air here, acrid and tinged with the iron scent of blood. His entire body feels like a plucked

wire, trembling and strung tight. Beside him, Phil is similar, half his face cast in constant shadow and blood smeared on his chin.

“How many?” Phil asks. Techno hasn’t really been keeping count, but he does a blurry callback.

“At least a dozen,” he says, and Phil grunts unhappily as they kick through another door and check the room. It’s dark, and seemingly empty.

“And at least five for me,” he says, heaving a sigh. Techno stops, turning slowly. Phil continues on: “It’s ridiculous. How many of them just hiding under our noses, making the city streets dangerous—”

Techno moves swiftly, just as the red cloak in the corner does. He intercepts the blade heading for Phil’s legs with his own body, a sting of pain cutting through the adrenaline, and swipes upwards, cutting neatly across their face. They scream— but he doesn’t pay attention to it, slashing his sword back across and across their throat. The screaming turns to gurgles, but the sound of metal on metal doesn’t end. When he turns, he finds Phil engaging with another one, and watches as he strikes them down.

Slowly, Techno leans down and unclips the clasp of the red cloak they’re wearing, slick with blood. He raises it to his face and stares at it, the way the blood stains the fabric.

“Prime,” someone says, and they both turn. Pete is standing in the doorway, similarly spattered and looking exhausted as he watches them clean up. “Your Grace. A few have been captured in the south, and many killed here— we should reconvene.”

“Yes,” Phil says decisively, stepping forward. “We should make sure the fires are under control as well. Come on.” Pete claps him on the shoulder, then looks at Techno as he moves to follow. They linger, and Pete watches him, eyes darting down to study the fabric Techno is still holding. It’s coarse when he rubs it between his fingers, thick and woolen.

“Yeah?” Techno asks, and Pete looks at him. He takes a moment to lean against the wall in silence. Outside, the screaming has stopped, and he can hear the shouts of men instead. It’s a good sign.

“I have been with the Empire for many, many years now,” Pete says, and when he says it, he really does sound... old. He laughs a little, breathless. “I have seen to two Emperors in my lifetime. I don’t want to see to a third.”

“I wouldn’t let anything happen,” Techno says.

“No,” Pete says. “You proved that just now. But you are young. And young people make mistakes. It’s how they learn. I look at you, and I see me. I look at Phil, and I see his father. I know the mistakes we made. I don’t want him to suffer them the way we did.”

“Yeah?” Techno asks, a bit bitterly.

“Yes,” Pete says honestly. He looks at Techno, all hard-steel eyes and cold blue cut of the Empire’s military uniform. There’s a splatter of blood across the front of it, and Techno’s eyes trace it before snapping back up to Pete’s. “You are not invincible.”

“I never thought I was,” Techno tells him.

“*Technoblade never dies?*” Pete quotes, and Techno looks away, feeling the heat rise to his face.

“It’s just a stupid saying,” he says quickly. “Something the cadets in the plaza came up with.”

“And yet you embrace it,” Pete says. “All I want is a good future for the Empire.”

“Then you gotta trust us to build it,” Techno says. Without looking at him— “You gotta trust *me*. ”

Pete laughs, but not in a bad way. Just tired. “I do trust you,” he says. “I trust you to at least have my back on a battlefield. It’s frightening, to think you’ll outlive me and see the consequences of our work.”

“Maybe I won’t,” Techno says. “Maybe you’ll live until you’re a hundred and four.”

“If I make it to ninety, put poison in my wine,” Pete grumbles, and Techno snorts. “I trust you now, Techno.”

“Even though I serve as a worshiper of the Blood God?” he asks, turning his head to look at Pete once more. Pete stares at him, and then nods, lowering his chin slowly before glancing out to the street.

“Yes,” he says. “Tonight, at least, has shown me you’ll do what you must for the good of the people.”

“And you trust me,” Techno repeats.

“Prime, yes,” Pete says, a bit exasperated.

“Good,” Techno says, slamming his sword into the wooden floor and using it to lean on. “Only took you five freakin’ years. Help me— I’m bleedin’.”

“You’re— what? Fuck, Techno—”

“‘Tis but a flesh wound,” Techno says cheerily, although he’s lost most of the feeling in his foot by now and he’s sure his socks are soaked through with blood. Pete is looking at him with a mixture of horror and bewilderment, but he doesn’t shy away and in fact reaches out to help Techno walk towards the sound of guardsmen.

“Young people,” Pete says, almost wondrous.

“Shut the hell up,” Techno fires back. He’s glad it’s dark out. Hides his grin.

He keeps the cloak.

He's not sure why he does. It sits in his room, in his closet, hidden between blue and gray and white. The blood of the red cloak who wore it before him has long since dried, but sometimes he passes his hands over it, feeling it crust and crumble underneath his fingers.

Pete catches him with it, once. A knock sounds on Techno's door when he's sitting in front of the fire on the plush carpet— he's still not used to the comfort of a soft chair, not even now, five years past his and Phil's meeting— and without thinking, he calls out, "Enter."

He's expecting it to be Phil, or maybe Ian. He is not expecting Pete. He doesn't so much as scramble to his feet as he does gracefully leap like a ballerina or deer, cloak still clutched between his fingers like a traitorous flag. He doesn't miss the way Pete glances down at it, then back up at him.

"I didn't take you as someone who collects trophies," he says lightly, and Techno frowns.

"I don't," he says. He crumples the fabric in his fist. "It's a reminder."

"A reminder indeed," Pete says, and nods. "I came to ask you about the soldiers in training, and any good candidates for squires. Am I right to continue?"

"I'm not hiding anything," Techno says on impulse. He holds the cloak out. "We can burn it together, if you want."

"Seems a bit dramatic," Pete says, shrugging. He steps further inside, the door shutting behind him, and Techno watches him warily. He takes the cloak in both hands, studying the dried blood on it, then drapes it across the couch and sits in the other chair, closer to the fire. "I trust you. Now. Squires?"

Techno squints, then sits back down.

The attacks had stopped, at least. He's sure they didn't get all of them a fortnight ago in Helton, but it was a close thing. Simon sends him a letter a week later detailing what he's heard— decentralization, a lost cause, and a few long-lost congregants returning to Hypixel with their tails between their legs.

He doesn't tell Phil about them. Better not to beat the already dead horse. He can't imagine they'll be aching for revenge, not after what happened.

Twenty-six red cloaks dead, a majority of them by his own hand. A few captured, locked beneath the palace. A number of families saved in the Limpway, and a few houses burnt down south of that. Since they'd retaliated, not a single attack has occurred.

“People are calling you the Monster of the Kirnach,” Ian tells him one morning at breakfast, a week and a half after they return from Helton, two nights after Pete came to him and began building a new bridge between them. Ian looks and sounds delighted as he reads the scrap of paper in his hand. “They also say they’re calling you the Summer Prince.”

“I’m not a prince,” Techno says offhandedly, stabbing a piece of ham.

“Oh, it’s because of your *hair*,” Ian says, voice thrilled. “The *pink*—”

“I’m not a prince,” Techno reiterates, looking to Phil for help. He’s also reading a piece of parchment, lips quirked up at the corner, hiding behind his morning tea mug.

“You’re not,” he says. “You’re a member of my council, and a general. I am definitely not your father.”

“He could be your brother,” Ian says, letting the paper slip from his hand back to the table and watching them with a smile.

“We look nothing alike,” Techno argues.

“Brothers-in-arms,” Phil says, raising a brow. He—

Well, he can’t find an argument for that. It’s true. They are.

“Gottem,” Phil murmurs, and Ian snickers loudly. Techno fights back a smile into his breakfast.

Chapter End Notes

the blood god!!!! techno is a divine host babey.... he's got a greek chorus through and through :) he and pete are on better terms now, for sure, which is a good thing! tbh things can only go up from here...

...right?

;)

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will update every friday!

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